

# Hell and Paradise

Vengeance and Forgiveness Series



Tejah Brawley

# **Hell and Paradise**

Vengeance and Forgiveness Series

Book Two

Tejah Brawley

## **Warning and Copyright**

Hello!

Welcome back to the world of Vengeance and Forgiveness! Before we dive back into this crazy story, let's get the warning and copyright out of the way. This series is rated M for Mature. There will be explicit language, blood, gore, and sexual themes. There will also be very touchy subjects touched upon throughout the story. In other words, your child shouldn't be reading this book right now. DO NOT give them this book for a birthday gift or Christmas gift. This series may be filled with magic and wonder, but the situations our friends and foes get themselves into are not for kids to see at their age. So, keep these books far away from them! I would hope you know that already, though, since this is the second book. If you're a newcomer, you might want to read the first book before coming here.

Now let's get into the Copyright information!

Copyright ©2022 by Tejah Brawley

All rights reserved.

Everything in this series(from the characters, to the items that are only mentioned ever so often) belongs to me, Tejah Brawley. You will not duplicate my work, claim my work as yours, or try to use any part of it for your own gain without my permission.

Okay, now we got that out of the way, we can get into the story! Thank you for taking the time to read this. I hope that you will enjoy the story, and hang tight... It's going to be another bumpy ride.

## Table of Contents

Intro.....	5
Prologue.....	6
Chapter 1.....	22
Chapter 2.....	35
Chapter 3.....	46
Chapter 4.....	51
Chapter 5.....	61
Chapter 6.....	81
Chapter 7.....	85
Chapter 8.....	92
Chapter 9.....	108
Chapter 10.....	114
Chapter 11.....	126
Chapter 12.....	136
Chapter 13.....	142
Chapter 14.....	150
Chapter 15.....	157
Chapter 16.....	165
Chapter 17.....	176
Chapter 18.....	188
Chapter 19.....	198
Chapter 20.....	212
Chapter 21.....	223

Chapter 22.....	230
Chapter 23.....	242
Chapter 24.....	253
Chapter 25.....	260
Chapter 26.....	271
Chapter 27.....	285
Chapter 28.....	299
Chapter 29.....	311
Chapter 30.....	320
Chapter 31.....	331
Chapter 32.....	339

## Intro

*Maza is a domain filled with light. Umu is a domain filled with darkness. Gaia is a domain filled with both. Spirit Realm merges with all domains and is a safe haven for Souls. Everything was in balance...until humans were created.*

*We all see how humans are... tainted, cursed, and most of the time... evil. They begin as innocent children, when they don't know the difference between virtue and sin. Then they grow into rotten fruits... some more rotten than even me. And humans believe that **I'm** the reason that bad things happen to them. Humans will believe in anything without giving it a second thought. You could tell them that you've found a cure to a disease, and they'll take that poison without question. It's hilarious. Yes...humans are the perfect candidates for the Pits. They will keep Umu alive and well lit. Their souls will be my people's energy source.*

*The Mazans believe that they can save these humans... but it's too late. The humans belong to the darkness, and they will not escape. Gaia will finally be engulfed in complete pain and agony, and humans will never see the light of day again... only darkness. The High Court should have joined my side a long time ago... it would have been a much different outcome. Oh well.*

*-Aidoneus, aka "The Devil", Ruler of Umu*

## **Prologue**

### **The Beginning**

A rough gray-furred spirit pitbull carries a rabbit across a dark place with only seven moons and lights from buildings and street poles to give some sort of guidance, and he heads towards the entrance of the realm. The rabbit may seem helpless, but he is actually doing his best to play dead despite the dog's slight-yellow canine teeth digging into his soft body, feeling as if his fangs were about to puncture his fleshy vessel, along with feeling his saliva soaking into his plush fur. The spirit dog runs and runs past all of the peonis and Upindeonis, not disturbing anyone's peace, leaving everyone to believe that he's just being Kendo's pet playing with his prey again. He gets to the tall bronze gates, where two Upindeoni Guards stand to determine incoming Souls' fate, whether they will be accepted as one of their own, become one of the Fallen for attempting to enter Maza first, or be told they aren't allowed inside and are immediately escorted to Maza(the Souls not knowing that they become part of the Saved when they go there).

With ease, the pitbull phases through the bronze gates, still holding onto his owner, and the various Souls watch the pitbull speed by them while the Upindeoni Guards don't pay any attention while analyzing the Souls' Past Lives. The warm, coarse sands slowly transitions to soft, emerald-green grass as the rabbit's ride runs further away from Umu and is now in a random spot in the Spirit Realm. He keeps running until he sees a portal that will take the rodent to a random spot in Gaia. He finally spots a portal, its shades of black and white dance and mesh together as the portal swirls around.

The dog gently puts down the rabbit, and he hops around in joy as he lets out a victory yelp. "WOOOOHOOOO!!" the fuzzy animal exclaims, "FREE AT LAST! FREE AT LAST! THANK GOD O' MIGHTY, I'M FREE AT LAST!!.....for the umteenth time..."

*Arf arf arf!! Pant pant pant!!*

The rabbit transforms into his human form, revealing to be Kendo. He adjusts himself and his baggy clothes along with his messy, black waves of hair, and he says, “Diablo, you’ve done it once again~! Ugh, although we *really* gotta upgrade our traveling system. No offense, buddy, but smelling like mildew while feeling sharp teeth practically about to poke holes into my body isn’t what I would call ‘First-Class’ travel.”

*Arf arf!! Arf arf!!*

“I knooooow boy, you can’t help it,” Kendo chuckles. Kendo looks at his best friend as he kneels down to his level and rubs his head, looking at his buddy’s right eye socket and left icy-blue eye and tracing the scars he’s received from his Past Life. “Man... we’ve really been through a lot together,” Kendo says softly, his voice cracking a little, “I’m sorry that Umu just isn’t for me... good thing you can pretty much go wherever you want to, right? Hehe... will I see you again?”

*Arf arf!! Arf arf! Arf arf arf arf!!* Lick, lick, lick, lick.

“Hahahaha!! Okay okay, I’ll hold you to it~” Kendo laughs as he cuddles Diablo, letting him lick his caramel cheek with his purple tongue. Kendo lets Diablo go and slowly approaches the portal, but before he enters it, he looks back at his friend and says, “Well, I’ll see you later, buddy!”

*Arf arf arf arf!!*

“Hmmm??” Kendo completely turns his body towards Diablo, and he sees Diablo puke out a small, sphere-shaped potion bottle filled with green, fizzy liquid. Kendo gasps and immediately grabs the substance and cheers, “You had gotten more for me! Oh I love you so much, Diablo~!!”

*Arf arf arf arf!! Pant pant pant pant!*



Kendo removes the cork and chugs down the substance that tastes of sour yet bitter lime, tart and bitter grapefruit, and sea salt. *Gulp gulp gulp*. Kendo hisses from the potion's offensive flavor and throws the bottle away. "Alright, now I won't have to worry about Cerberus sniffing me out...for a while," Kendo mutters, "If I don't waste time, I can try to make some more distance." Kendo kneels down to give Diablo one more embrace, hearing his friend whimper one last time. He kisses his furry head, and he runs off into the portal, preparing himself to go through this cycle once again, now trying to prolong his stay as much as he can.

...

**June 2017**  
**Morning**

Kendo continues walking through the portal, trying to not be too distracted by the shades of black, white, and gray that surround him. He keeps walking for what feels like for centuries until he makes it to a beam of light. "Finally," Kendo sighs out, and he sprints towards the exit. As soon as his body goes through the light, he notices his body being pulled upwards and he's no longer on the 'ground'. Seconds later, the light disappears, and Kendo's body flies out of the portal and lands on plush grass. *Thud!* Kendo softly grunts from the impact, and he looks around to see that he is in a large forest, the sunlight saturating the trees' green leaves and brown trunks. He looks up and gazes at the clear, blue sky and birds flying by as they chirp their hello's. "Aah," Kendo sighs, "A forest this time~? I wonder where I am exactly~?" He gets up and takes in the view.

His heart pitter patters as his eyes digest the luscious sight of his earthly home. He inhales the fresh, crisp air as the soft breeze brushes against him and his wild hair. He walks around until he sees a cave. "Oouuu~" Kendo says, "I haven't seen a cave in a long time~!" He stands at the entrance of the mysterious cave and transforms into a black and white cat, and he runs inside,

trying to see what he can find. As he walks inside the cave's mouth, the darkness blinds him, making it very difficult to look around; so he transforms back into his human form, leaves the Spirit Realm, and summons flames onto his right hand, illuminating as much as he can.

The flames unfortunately don't reveal much as Kendo only sees the empty cave walls and the lonely, cold ground. "Tsk," Kendo scoffs, "And I thought I would find something or someone in here. Not even a bug is crawling around here. Oh well..." However, as he tries to make his exit, his left foot accidentally bumps against a heavy object, almost tripping him over. "Whoa, what the hell?" Kendo questions as he makes his quick recovery. He looks down and sees a thick, black book with a gray outline of an eye on it. He picks it up with his free, left hand, and hovers his flaming right hand, and he reads the title of the book. "*The Reaper's Contract*," Kendo mutters. He opens the book looking at one of the pages, and he notices that the page mentions Umu and his father. "Ooh no," Kendo says, "Don't tell me this is a cult book." As soon as he makes the conclusion, he starts noticing the negative energy that emits from the book, and, instantly, he begins feeling that same dark energy someplace else. He looks at a certain spot in the cave, and he notices a portal on the ground in the Spirit Realm, its dark, murky, rainbow colors swirling around in the darkness, signifying that it'll take anyone to and from Umu. Kendo groans loudly, letting it echo throughout the cave and he yells, "COME THE FUCK ON, WHAT ARE THE CHANCES!?" His exclamation reaches to the outside of the cave, disturbing some of the animals that were nearby.

Kendo storms out of the cave with *The Reaper's Contract* as he takes deep breaths, trying to keep his frustration in check. "*Calm down, Kendo, calm down*," Kendo whispers to himself, "*The potion lasts for about a day and Cerberus clearly hasn't gotten the order to come find me, yet, so I have a chance. I just need to find the nearest civilization, find someone spiritual and holy*

*enough to get rid of that portal, and I'll be good to go. I know Cerberus is going to come here, but there's **no way** I'm 'bout to let them get close to me **that** easily."*

...

### **Present**

The sky is pitch black. No stars sparkle and no clouds move by. Only seven, white full moons in a circle light up the sky and dusty area along with the lights coming from different buildings and the dim street lights. People with leather wings and horns of different shapes and colors walk around a crowded town. Some are walking with their children or a rugged wolf on a leash, while others are riding black horses that have fiery red eyes.

One guy chants, "SPIKED FRUITS! PRICKLY AND SOUR! THE BEST FRUIT EVER BEARED IN UMU! ONLY 300 BLOOD RUBIES PER SPIKED FRUIT!" as he waves his hands around trying to get the people's attention. He picks up a yellow, round fruit that is covered with small but pointy spikes from his small, dirty concession stand, and continues, "GET THEM WHILE THEY'RE FRESH! ONLY 300 BLOOD RUBIES!"

However, another guy across from him yells, "OH SHUT THE FUCK UP! THEY CAN GET THOSE NASTY ASS FRUITS SOMEWHERE ELSE FOR ONLY 30 BLOOD RUBIES!" Then, he picks up a purple banana-shaped fruit and yells, "COME ON PEOPLE, WOULD YOU RATHER EAT SOME FRUIT THAT GIVES YOU YUCK MOUTH FROM ONE BITE, OR WOULD YOU RATHER EAT A FRUIT THAT SATISFIES YOUR TUMMY? GET YOUR PURPLE FANTASIES TODAY, ONLY 90 BLOOD RUBIES PER BUNCH!"

The spiked fruit seller yells, "BITCH, YOUR FRUIT WOULD GIVE YOUR CUSTOMERS THE RUNS!!"

The purple fantasy seller responds, “YEAH? WELL AT LEAST MY FRUIT IS CLEANSING YOUR COLON! YOUR FRUIT IS ONLY GOOD FOR IRRITATING THE ESOPHAGUS, DUMBASS!”

As the two competitive sales people argue over whose product is better, bystanders laugh and instigate or continue walking. Seconds later, a rough-haired woman in lacy lingerie and a fur coat walks out of a building close to the concession stands. She walks towards the two men and yells out, “Hey, assholes! Could you go take your business *elsewhere*!? Like AWAY from the brothel!?”

The spiked fruit salesman responds, “Hah! You sayin’ we’re driving away your customers? Well guess what, hoe bag, *no one* is missing out on you *or* your expired goods.”

“Yeah,” the purple fantasy salesman jumps in, “Shouldn’t the brothel have closed down *eons* ago? I thought you and your girls moved to the Lust District?”

“Oh trust me, we’re working on it,” the sex worker responds, “And the sooner we move there, the sooner I don’t have to hear you yapping twats arguing over a bunch of fruit.”

“Oh go suck on a dick, whore. At least we’re making *real* money,” the spiked fruit salesman hisses out.

“Yeah, and at least our products aren’t worn out,” the purple fantasy salesman adds.

“Hm, you say my goods are worn out, I say that your wives’ pussies are made of sandpaper,” the sex worker growls back, “It’s no wonder you two’s dicks are always in a bunch.” She turns around to walk back into the brothel, and without looking at the two guys, she says, “When you’re ready to spend that *‘hard earned’* money, I’ll be waiting,” and she gives them the middle finger before entering the brothel.

The two salesmen don't say anymore to the woman as they go back to selling their fruits, and suddenly, three men walk by. The spiked fruit salesman says, "Oh! Cerberus, there you are! Where have you been!?"

The purple fantasy salesman says, "Yeah, did you finally get the little bastard?"

The dark-brown man, Alpha, doesn't stop walking, and he doesn't say anything. As a matter of fact, he increases his speed, trying to avoid the conversation. The two salesmen scrunch up their faces in confusion, but they look at the wounded medium-brown man, Beta, and immediately their questions have been answered. Beta holds his right arm as blood from his sliced shoulder ruins his clothes, and a light-brown man, Gamma, stays close to him to help him walk. They pass the two salesmen, and Gamma yells, "Alpha!! Hold up!!"

Alpha doesn't say a word as he keeps walking through the town, passing by runned down apartments and dim-lit stores. Beta whispers to Gamma, "*It's okay, Gamma... we can take our time.*"

Gamma looks at his wounded brother and responds, "You kidding me, Beta!? You're hurt...*badly!*!"

The three brothers keep walking in the middle of the road until *ding-a-ding-a-ding-a-ding!* A black and red carriage being drawn by two black horses approaches, and a coachman dressed in a black and gray satin tux slows down the horses as he rings his bronze bell to signal the Cerberus Brothers. The Cerberus Brothers walk to the side of the road to look at the carriage. The carriage stops, and a champagne-skinned woman with dark green horns opens the door and immediately sits back to where it's hard to see her. The coachman says, "Lady Morgana would like for you three to come along."

Alpha immediately enters the carriage, Beta and Gamma following him. They sit on the opposite side of Morgana, a heavy-set, curvaceous woman wearing a purple business suit and knee-length skirt with her maroon-red, kinky hair flowing down her back. She adjusts her cat-eye red and gold glasses as she scrolls through a tablet. Without taking her eyes off her tablet, she closes the door, and the coachman orders the horses to continue the ride. Morgana glances up to see the brothers, and she sees Beta's wound, making her softly gasp and put her tablet down. "What happened?!" Morgana softly exclaims, controlling her volume.

"Don't worry about it, Morgue..." Alpha says in a low tone, "Just tell Lord Aidoneus to have the Healers on standby."

Not saying another word, she pulls out her phone and makes a call. The only sound that is being made now is the horses outside trodding through the dusty road. Alpha looks outside the window to watch everything go by while Gamma looks at Beta's wounds. Beta softly whimpers as he looks at his own wound and hisses out of pain. Gamma growls, "That fucking bitch...how the hell did those humans get those powers!? Amethyst couldn't have given the powers to them, could she?"

"That's impossible..." Alpha responds, "It would take decades for them to gain such powers. They had to have gone to an Umrha for potions... and their little Quphanto friend, Rose, had to have given them a huge boost. It doesn't help that *her father* got to us before them..." Gamma looks at his eldest brother as he's speaking, and he tries to look at Alpha's left arm, but Alpha leans against his side of the carriage. "I'm fine, Gamma..." Alpha immediately says, calmly. His left arm still pulsates from the gun wound he received from his first fight with Issei. The bleeding isn't as bad as Beta's, since he can easily heal from gun wounds, but the blistering chill hasn't stopped.

*“Hello, sir...”* Morgana says softly, finally getting someone to answer her call. *“Yes, sir; I’m just a few minutes away, but I have a request... Are there any Healers available at the moment?... Cerberus is with me, and they need immediate care... Well... I don’t know what happened to them, sir; they haven’t told me anything... I know....From the looks of it, it’s just Beta needing the help-”*

“And Alpha!!” Gamma exclaims, making Alpha and Morgana jolt their heads towards the youngest brother with faces of surprise.

*“...Y-Yes, sir; that was Gamma...”* Morgana responds in the same soft volume, *“...I don’t know what’s wrong with Alpha, but Gamma is suggesting that the Healers will need to-”*

Alpha interrupts, “No, I don’t need any-”

“Oh stop bullshitting, brother!!” Beta hisses out, “You got fucked up just like I did. You can’t sit there and tell me that the gun wound isn’t bothering you right now.” Alpha stays silent, not responding.

*“...Very well, sir... Yes, I’ll be sure to tell them... Okay, see you in a minute,”* Morgana ends the call and takes a sigh. She then starts talking in a calm, monotone voice, and she says, “Lord Aidoneus is going to have the Healers take care of Alpha and Beta. He is going to want to hear what happened from you, Gamma.” The brothers take in the commands that Morgana just stated, and they nod their heads in understanding. Not saying another word, Morgana goes back to her tablet to scroll through what she was working on earlier.

The carriage is now outside the town and goes through a sandy open plain. The road begins to become curvy, resembling a snake. From a distance on both sides of the road, millions of lava pits can be found. Inside the bright pits are souls in the shape of humans screaming and struggling to get out. Their bodies slowly burn, trying to disappear, but because they are only

Souls, they cannot die and they try to maintain their forms, creating holes that slowly close in various places on their bodies. Some manage to escape only for an Upindeoni to knock them back down and belittle them. After several minutes, the carriage gets to a stone arch bridge that leads to a massive, dark iridescent castle. The carriage circles around a tall tiered wine fountain and stops at the door. Morgana opens the door to let the Cerberus Brothers exit the carriage first. She leaves after them, closes the door, and walks up to the coachman to give him a small pouch. She says, "Here's your tip, sir. Thanks, again."

"I appreciate you, m'lady," the coachman says joyfully, "I hope Lord Aidoneus doesn't overwork you, today."

"Don't worry, I'll be okay," Morgana responds in a monotone voice but gives a soft smile. The coachman and his horse friends leave the area as the Cerberus Brothers and Morgana walk up to the entrance. Morgana walks up to the hand scanner that is where the door handles would be. She places her hand on the scanner, and after a few seconds, the doors open. The four Umuites walk into the building, greeted by the soft light coming from the many crystal chandeliers, the eerie vibe coming from the black and white checkerboard floor, and the vibrant, crimson red carpet that leads to a black and gold throne, where three peonies in short white jackets that expose their chest area and red stockings and white heels talk amongst themselves.

They see Morgana and the Cerberus Brothers approach them, and they immediately walk towards them. One of the Healers looks at Beta, and she asks, "Oh my goodness, what happened to you!?"

Alpha lets out a long sigh and says, "It's a long story..." As the Healers lead Beta and Alpha down the left hallway to the Recovery Rooms, one of them grabs out a walkie-talkie, muttering. The only people left in the throne room are Morgana and Gamma.



Morgana looks at Gamma with calm, jade-green eyes and says, “Lord Aidoneus should be here at any moment. Would you like for me to get you anything else while you wait?” Gamma only shakes his head. Morgana nods her head in understanding and says, “Well, if you’re good, then I’ll leave you be. I have some things to attend to, but the Healers should be able to update you on your brothers in a few minutes.”

As she walks into the right-side hallway, Gamma stares at her with daggers, and he growls out, “You let Anti out of his cell... didn’t you?”

Morgana’s heart jumps at Gamma’s question. With all her courage, she tries to stop her lips from quivering and her hands to stop sweating. She slowly turns to face Gamma with a stoic face and responds calmly, “I don’t know what you are talking about, Gamma. You know that I can’t ever go near the Correction Room-”

“*Unless* you had to give that brat his daily dosages,” Gamma interrupts, “Don’t think that I’m an idiot, Morgana. You know my schedule, and I know yours. Aidoneus knows that out of everyone in this building, you have been able to develop a relationship with Anti and stay close to him.”

“I understand that, but at the end of the day, this is my job,” Morgana snaps back, keeping her calm composure. “I care for Kendo... but I can only do so much for him.”

“Okay... so if you didn’t free Anti, then who did? I wouldn’t think any of the guards would because there is no benefit for them.”

“I don’t know... I wish I could tell you...”

“Pretty strange how Anti’s straitjacket was in the Correction Room and the door was wide open... with the Upindeoni guarding the door unconscious...and you were the only person scheduled to come in the room around that time.”

“Gamma, what are you trying to accomplish here? I know that I did help Kendo in the past, but ever since Aidoneus began taking his son to the Correction Room, he made it crystal clear that I cannot aid Kendo anymore or it’s goodbye to my job.”

“*Alright... that’s enough...*” A deep, serene voice echoes throughout the throne room, putting a stop to Morgana and Gamma’s argument. A brown-skinned Upindeoni a few inches shorter than Gamma walks out of the left hallway, only the sound of his dress shoes echo throughout the throne room. *Click! Click! Click! Click!* The Upindeoni softly smiles at his comrades as he approaches them and says, “Morgana...new recruits will be arriving soon...you already know that I will have to prepare my ‘big speech’~! In the meantime, I have a favor to ask of you. While you’re dealing with your tasks, could you find the time to call my friends? Tell them I want to have a meeting with them~.”

“...Yes, sir,” Morgana says, “I’ll let you know if there are any complications...”

“Don’t worry, there shouldn’t be any problems~,” The black-horned Upindeoni replies back.

“Well, yes, but you know how...*they* are.”

“Hmhmhmhmhm~ Oh yes... well, if you have to, just tell them that I’m holding a huge event~ And if they ask you what this event is, tell them that it’ll take place at the Colosseum~ *That’ll* be enough to convince them to come here~”

“Okay... I’ll get to it, Lord Aidoneus...”

“I appreciate you, Morgana~”

Not saying anything else, Morgana goes on her merry way and goes to her office. Aidoneus adjusts his black velvet tuxedo and straightens up his gold and bronze jewelry that are adorned with rubies, emeralds, and diamonds. He looks at Gamma, and his soft smile is instantly wiped off. Aidoneus throws away the cheery tone, and says in a strict tone, “Gamma... I saw your

brothers. They both suffered some sort of injury... and I see now that you're hurt as well. It's just a graze, but that's still worrisome. On top of that, I don't see my son or *her*. Care to explain what happened?"

Gamma whimpers softly, not really wanting to tell Aidoneus that for the first time in centuries, they have failed to bring Kendo back to Umu. However, knowing that Aidoneus is a busy Upindeoni, the homicidal hound answers, "We were close, sir... We had Anti in our grasp, but he had a little help this time... enough help that forced us to come back..."

"Hmm..." Aidoneus mutters, "Wasn't Alphonse with you...?"

"Alphonse only wasted our time..."

"... Did he now...?"

"Yes, he abandoned us after he played off like he could possess an Upendelaiki, when in reality-"

"Back up a bit...an *Upendelaiki*?"

"Yes, sir. In order to catch the cat, Alphonse captured two Upendelaikis for bait. But the cat managed to get help from three humans, a Samaka-human hybrid, and Usiku's daughter."

"Wha-...Wait a minute-"

"And Anti had gotten help from Issei, the peoni hunter."

".....So let me get this straight... Alphonse left you three after having his fun. Sounds like Alphonse. And then you all got ganged up by two Upendelaikis, the infamous peoni hunter, Ubokufa's descendent's daughter, a simple hybrid, and three mere *humans*?"

"Yes..."

"And Anti and the cat managed to rally them up..."

"Yes..."

“Uh-huh... hmm...” Aidoneus thinks about all that he’s been told. His #1 spirit hound, Cerberus, has always been able to bring back his son no matter how long it took. But to come back empty handed is new. He scratches his chin, his plans swirling through his head. “And tell me,” he begins, “What about these *humans* that made it so difficult for you to come back with your target?”

“They had magical powers...” Gamma quickly answers. Aidoneus’ fiery orange-yellow ombre eyes scan the checkerboard floor as if he’s planning his next move. After a few seconds, he then snickers, showing his pearly white, straight teeth.

“**Hehehehehehehehe**... Well then... I appreciate you, Gamma~. Thank you for letting me know what’s going on. I’m sure there are some more details in there somewhere, but that doesn’t matter. Go reunite with your brothers, get healed up, and you three go back to the Pits. You’re free to go~,” Aidoneus says in a cheery tone, his serene smile making a return.

“So we don’t have to do anything else?” Gamma asks, his eyes lighting up.

“Nope~! Just go back to doing what you do best~. And I apologize for all these years of having you babysit my child... that is not your place. From this point on, let me handle it~,” Aidoneus responds happily.

“Oh! A-Alright. But what about Amethyst? Pierre is still in Gaia trying to accomplish his goal, but we don’t know what’s going on at this point,” Gamma asks, tilting his head in confusion while his heart beats in a happy beat after hearing that his brothers and he can go back to torturing and guarding the Fallen.

“Amethyst? **Hahahaha!** *That’s* what her name is now?? I’m curious as to how much her appearance has changed~,” Aidoneus wonders, “Well...hmmm... I’ll worry about her later. I’m sure I’ll figure out a way to hit two birds with one stone~. Now run along~!”

“Oh! Y-Yes sir! Thank you sir!” Gamma stammers as he speeds his way to the Recovery Rooms. Aidoneus watches Gamma leave with the same smile, and he sits at his plush throne.

He looks at the room, and he lets out a long sigh, his smile disappearing once again. “No worries,” Aidoneus says softly, “Things are about to get *extra* spicy~” He grabs his phone and taps on Morgana’s contact. He places the phone up to his ear and in a low, serious tone, he says, “Morgana?...Just checking to see how’s everything...hmhmmhm, I know, it’s only been a few minutes, but you always have to check. Have you got a chance to contact any of my friends yet?...Okay, no no, that’s good actually! Take your time, dear. I just wanted you to tell the maids to tidy up the throne room and dining room and the chefs to prepare a feast for seven... Oh, and just tell the chefs that they are for my friends, and they’ll know exactly what to whip up~...You’re a sweetheart~ I’ll let you continue your work~ I’m grateful to have you as an assistant~.” He hangs up and he looks at the chandeliers.

*“Oh Anti,”* Aidoneus whispers, *“Your love for these humans are hindering my plans... Why can’t you see that if you stay right by my side as my son, we will go a long way? You always talked about this place being boring... this place being a prison... if fun is what you’re looking for... **all you had to do was be a little more specific~...**”* Intense silence fills the room as Aidoneus’ words are left dangling in the air. The high-class Upindeoni then touches on his shiny black horns and his eyes widen as he lets out a gasp, “Oh dear, I can’t give that speech today without my horn jewelry!” After saying this, Aidoneus immediately gets up and walks down the hallway to the elevator to get to his bedroom.

**Chapter 1**  
**The Beginning**  
**June 2017**  
**Afternoon**

Kendo, still in his human form, makes it out of the forest, seeing now that it's a camping site, and walks down a highway for what seems like hours. Many cars pass him, but despite his disheveled appearance, no one bothers to slow down to check on him. Nonetheless, Kendo continues walking in his steady pace, hoping to find someone kind enough to give him a ride. "Ugh, come oooooon," Kendo groans, "Surely someone wants to give me the full hitchhiker experience again... Heeheehee, I remember last time~... Ooh, that's it~!" As soon as the idea blossoms, Kendo looks at the highway and sees a car about to pass by. Seeing that he still has time, Kendo immediately stands in the middle of the lane, flailing his arms around, trying to stop the car. However, the car ends up swerving away from Kendo and almost hits a car from the opposite side. *HOOOOONK!!!!* Both cars curse at each other as they pass by, leaving Kendo in the dust. "Awww, come on~!! They usually stop for me!" Kendo pouts.

He gets back to the side of the road and continues walking until another car comes around. He looks back to see another car about to roll by. He immediately runs to the middle of the lane, doing his routine again. However, the car doesn't give any indication of stopping, and Kendo's eyes pop open as his body automatically hops out of the way and his side hits the hard, dusty ground. *VROOOOOOOM!!!!* The car zooms by as if it never saw Kendo in the first place. Kendo gets up, and yells, "FUCK YOU, TOO, DICKWAD!! THAT'S WHY YOU DON'T GOT BITCHES!! GOOD DRIVING IS A TURN ON, YOU KNOW!!" His complaints float through the air for only nature to listen to, the car long gone. Kendo mutters, "Damn, these humans aren't as considerate...and yet I love you all still~... *sighs* I guess I'm gonna have to do this the boring, supernatural way." After saying that, he makes sure that no one is around, and clutches the cult

book tightly as he goes back to the Spirit Realm and transforms into a condor and flies high into the air, his feet carrying the book.

...

**June 2017**

**Late Afternoon**

Kendo, as a condor in the Spirit Realm, flies high in the sky, seeing nothing but trees until he starts seeing the top of buildings grouped together. *Alright*, Kendo thinks to himself, *Where can we find the nearest Upendelaiki?* Kendo closes his eyes as he flies aimlessly, honing in his spiritual skills to sense a heavenly aura. His brain begins tingling and his body gains a mind of its own as it leads Kendo to his solution.

Kendo flies for a few more minutes, until he feels his body diving. He opens his eyes to see a big apartment complex near the town square. “Ooouuuu,” Kendo says, “My hero stays here~? It looks pretty nice~!” He lowers himself near the entrance and transforms back into his human form, carrying *The Reaper’s Contract*. “Hmmm,” Kendo says, tapping his chin, “I can’t just leave the book with them without any context. Let’s see....Oh, I know~!” Racing against the clock, Kendo phases through the doors and looks around, admiring the blue walls and white front desk with no receptionist present. “Perfect~!” Kendo exclaims, and he immediately leaves the Spirit Realm and walks to the front desk, searching for a blank piece of paper and a good pen. He manages to find paper, rips a piece of it off, and he grabs a black ballpoint pen, hastily writing his message, *‘Hey. Upendelaikis are supposed to keep things clean and holy, right? Well, take care of this book and the cave it came from. Your pal, K.’*

Not bothering to see if he made any grammar mistakes or if the message will be clear enough, Kendo stuffs the message inside the cult book, leaves the rest of the blank paper on the desk, and tosses the pen over his shoulder as he scurries to the elevator, not noticing that two humans

behind him witnessed his actions. “Um, excuse me,” the middle-aged human woman says as she points at the pen on the floor, “Aren’t you going to pick this pen up and put it back where it belongs?”

Another middle-aged woman supports her colleague and joins, “Exactly. Never mind the ripped paper that you just decided to leave. You could *at least* do the same for the pen.”

Before Kendo responds, he presses the elevator button with the arrow going up, and he looks at you, the reader, with a devious smirk. He looks back at the two humans and says, “Sorry, ladies, but as much as I would love to sit here and listen to you get pissed off over something you can take care of yourself, I’m not your husband... if you even have one.”

The two women gasp at Kendo’s response. The first lady is too stunned to give a rebuttal, but the second lady goes off and says sarcastically, “Wow, and I’m sure you get a lot of women acting like that!”

“Oh I do~! I get women and then some,” Kendo snaps, hearing the elevator open up for him. He walks inside, and before the elevator doors close, he says as he winks, “Anyway, I gotta take care of business, and you two clearly need someone to fuck the bitchiness out of you. Have a blessed day~!” Before the women can share their thoughts, the doors close the conversation, taking Kendo up a few floors, playing soothing lo-fi hip hop music to enhance the journey.

Several seconds later, the elevator stops abruptly, and the doors open, letting Kendo out. He walks out of the elevator and looks up and down the hallway, trying to figure out where his heavenly hero could be. Seeing that there’s no one around, he begins walking to the right, running his right hand across the blue walls and closing his eyes to hone in on the pure soul. He keeps walking down the quiet hall, until the holy aura he’s been looking for becomes as strong as



Kendo's want for his freedom. He stops in front of a particularly sleek, light-brown door, the urge to bust it down and beg the Mazan to save him.

Hearing the clock ticking in his mind, Kendo places *The Reaper's Contract* in front of the door, and he knocks on the wood. *Knock knock knock knock knock!!* "Coming!" a man's voice says, startling Kendo. The Upindeoni-human hybrid immediately goes back to the Spirit Realm and transforms into a black and white cat, walking away from the door and heading for the stairs. Even though he is extremely curious as to who his savior is, he believes that it's best if he keeps everything as discreet as possible until he knows for sure that the job will be done.

Kendo lets out a sigh as he makes it to the first floor and leaves the complex, and he says "Alright, Upendelaiki... you do this for me, and I promise you, your reward will be grand~ Hmmmmmm... although I should consider having a Plan B ready in case shit hits the fan... Eh, lemme take a break from all this and explore this place a little bit first~!"

...  
**Present**  
**July 2017**  
**Night**

Winds become still, and the trees don't make a sound. Not even the cicadas, crickets, or frogs dare to play their instruments. Dark, ominous clouds cover the stars and moon. Fireflies are nowhere to be found to give light. Darkness takes over the entire forest. But in a few seconds, seven pairs of small, red eyes begin to glow as they rest upon the tree branches. Ten hearts begin to pound rapidly for different reasons as ten pairs of eyes try to find a particular guy that unleashed the unnerving scream, the name "Rose Nruku Garcia" still thundering throughout the forest. A caramel-skinned woman clasps her soft hands together and closes her ruby eyes, and out of thin air, white fireflies appear and create a circle around the open area, bringing in light as if they were dancing stars.

Soft gasps can be heard as soon as the light reveals a cloaked, dark-skinned man closing his eyes and taking deep breaths. He removes his hood and looks straight at the woman that created the light and says in a stern voice, “Rose. What... are you doing here?” Rose gives him no smile as her frustration begins to boil over. Seeing her father stand before her and question her as if she’s in the wrong makes her clasp her hands even more tightly. Irritation instantly makes Rose storm towards him, and her four friends watch her, not sure what’s going on.

The honey-skinned woman(Tenacity), the vanilla-skinned woman(Jacqueline), the beige-skinned lady(Melissa), and the brown sugar-skinned lady(Nermal) look at Rose with worry. Ever since the day that Tenacity, Melissa, and Jacqueline learned about the existence of mythical beings and had gotten their magical powers, Rose has been acting strange. Is it because of her father, Usiku? A dark-skinned woman with sparkling, purple eyes(Amethyst) looks at Rose and Usiku, knowing what’s about to go down, but her lover, a pale, white-haired Upendelaiki(Alexander), looks confused.

“Hm?” Alexander tilts his head and whispers to Amethyst, “*What’s... happening...? Is Rose... Is Rose mad???*”

“*Well, clearly,*” Amethyst whispers back, “*And I’m afraid I think I know why...*”

“What am *I* doing here?” Rose says with force towards her father, “No, what are *you* doing here?”

“...Pumpkin, let’s go home,” Usiku says in a calmer voice.

“No, dad. You brought your secretive ass all the way here. Let’s talk ***now***,” Rose calmly says, though the fireflies begin to dance at an unsteady beat. Her friends try to get closer to her, but her voice makes them back away from her slowly.

“...Rose?” Tenacity softly says.

However, before anyone else can try to call for the unstable M-Hybrid, Amethyst immediately walks up to them and softly says, “Ladies, it’s best that you stay out of this one...”

Kendo looks from a distance. He looks at you, the reader, with his hand over his mouth as if he’s afraid to say anything, and he puts his focus back onto the gang. However, as soon as Kendo lays his eyes back at his source of entertainment, Usiku’s eyes shoot him in the heart. Usiku glares at Kendo, and Rose catches on to look at Kendo, as well. Blood rushes to Kendo’s face, and his heart jumps all over the place. Rose looks back at Usiku and exclaims, “Why are you looking at him!? He isn’t going to save you!! Oh, or is he another one of your secrets!?”

Usiku doesn’t say a word as he reverts his attention back onto his daughter. The fireflies become more sporadic. Kendo’s mouth fights with his brain, telling him that he should tell Rose that he indeed has met Usiku before; however, his brain doesn’t want to add fuel to the flame. He just met these girls, the girls that saved him from the Cerberus Brothers and Pierre. But then again, it’s the truth, right? Everyone deserves to know the truth. The question is: Is it his place to tell her the truth? The better question is: Wouldn’t it be more interesting if he decides to tell her if Usiku won’t? This question makes Kendo look at you, the reader, with sinister eyes and a smirk to form underneath his hand. He frees his lips and says in a loud and clear tone, “My my, Usiku~! You never told her about me~!? Awww man, this would have been a beautiful reunion~!”

Kendo’s voice makes everyone look at him in shock. Alexander immediately attempts to take a few steps towards Kendo, but his twin brother, Thomas, grabs him by the shoulder to stop him. “*Alex, what are you doing?*” Thomas whispers.

“*He’s up to no good, Thomas!*” Alexander whispers back.

“*What do you mean?*” Thomas tilts his head and squints his eyes in confusion.

However, before Alexander can explain, Kendo continues, “Yes~! Rose, *your father* actually saved me before~! Let’s see, what year was that... ah yes, 1991~! A warm 1991 at that~! It was in Louisiana, however, in a forest-y area like this~. I *begged* him to save me from Cerberus, and thank goodness they put up a fight at the time since Usiku came off as a ‘worthy opponent’, but ooh boy were they wrong for thinking they could win~! Hahaha~! You should have seen how swift Usiku was at..ahem... ‘killing’ them! I’ve never seen Cerberus revert back to a soul’s first form~! Huh... Now that I say it out loud, it’s no wonder you ladies won so easily~! It’s thanks to your daddy, Rose~! Go on Usiku~! I won’t steal your thunder~! Tell her the details~!”

“...”

Silence. Complete silence. Rose looks back at Usiku, her eyes pleading him to say something, but nothing escapes his lips. Fiery tears build up between her eyes and Usiku as her heart trembles and her breathing becomes unsteady. Usiku and everything around her becomes blurry. She takes a few deep breaths, trying to calm herself down as she steps towards her father and says, “Say something....Go ahead, dad....Tell me what it was like to take down Cerberus...” Usiku takes a step forward, getting closer to his enraged daughter, but his mouth fails him to say anything else to her. Rose takes two more steps, tears slowly falling. She continues, “Tell me, dad. How did you beat Cerberus? Did you have fun? In fact, let’s make a campfire and hear ALL of your stories! How did you meet mom? Who are my grandparents? Do I have any uncles and aunts *besides* Uncle Shandon and Auntie Zeena? Do I have any cousins *besides* Cocoa, despite her being a dog? Why do you not have a last name? Why do you always have those seven bats with you?”

“Rose,” Usiku calls out to Rose; however, her ears mute him, and the fireflies begin flying at a faster speed.

Rose continues through the blazing tears in her moistened eyes, “Why do you always have on that cloak? Why do I even have these powers!?! How do you even know Alex and Amethyst? Who are you to get my friends involved in this bullshit, and what made you think I would be okay with it!?!”

“...”

Rose takes one more step, only a few inches away from Usiku, and while attempting to not break down and cry, she says, “So much came up in the matter of weeks, daddy...all because you didn’t want to help Amy...and now I got people telling me things about you I didn’t know before...”

Usiku finally says, “Rose...There are some things about me that you-”

“Wouldn’t understand?” Rose interrupts, “I understand not telling me anything when I was a kid, but I’m a grown up now, and I *still* don’t know my family!”

“...”

**“Who are you?”**

“Pumpkin, I am your father. As your father, I wanted to-”

“Make me a better version of you and mom. You two wanted to see a part of yourselves that never got to ‘blossom’. I already know this. I heard this speech a million times. You’ve told me this for 18 years...”

“...”

“But... for... a long time now... I didn’t want to mention this to anyone...because I thought that maybe I was tripping... but ever since graduation, I kept having these nightmares. These nightmares kept showing me horrifying images...people dying...skeletons with glowing eye

sockets trying to grab me and telling me things in different languages I can't understand... a guy in a cloak covered in blood and laughing while holding a beating heart..."

"Rose-"

"Right when that guy turns to look at me, I wake up...but I catch a glimpse of him...and he looks almost like you every time..."

Everyone listens to Rose's description of her nightmares, the overflow of discomfort and sharp chills take over everyone. Everyone's hearts jump and their thoughts shuffle into perplexion and anxiety as they imagine what Rose saw when she sleeps. In hopes that the Quphanto/human hybrid brings clarity into the situation, they look at Usiku, not saying a word or breathing loudly to hear what he's going to say to ease his daughter, but alas...silence.

A lump grows within Rose's throat, but she manages to say, "***I try and I try and I try to ignore these nightmares, daddy...but now that this has happened, I can't help but now think that they're trying to tell me who you are. So please... Just tell me something... anything... before anyone else in the Waking Life or Dream Realm tries to tell me and make me question my image of you... Who is Usiku...?***"

"..."

Usiku's eyes light up in sorrow as he sees his daughter lost in the flames of her confusion. Before he can even say anything else, Rose pushes him so hard that he is forced to take a few steps back to regain his balance; at this instant, the white fireflies completely lose their rhythm and now fly around in chaos as if it's a rave. "***FUCKING TELL ME!!!***" Rose's shrilling scream strikes throughout the forest, making everyone except for Usiku and a brown-skinned man with orange eyes(Issei) cover their ears.

"*Holy shit...!*" Melissa whispers out, feeling her ears ring.

“Owowowowow...!” Jacqueline hisses out.

“R-Rosie...” Nermal whimpers out through her tears.

Tenacity wants to call out to Rose, but her lips stay sealed. She sees that Rose is trying to hold back her emotions, but they slowly slip through her fingers. Perhaps it’s best if she stays out of it and just let Rose express her emotions how she wants to.

“***TELL ME RIGHT NOW!***” Rose screams some more, and she pushes Usiku again. “***TELL ME WHO YOU ARE, USIKU!!***” Usiku tries to approach Rose. She pushes her father once more, but this push is her weakest one, as her sorrow gets the best of her irritation. “*Whimpers* Daddy....” Usiku looks at Rose, a soft frown forming. She rests her head against Usiku, not embracing him, but feeling the intense warmth invade her face. *Sobs*. Her cries make the fireflies disappear, leaving everyone in darkness once again.

Everyone is frozen in their steps. What do they do? Do they comfort Rose? Do they say something? Do they question Usiku? What can they possibly do to not continue this unfathomable pain? Issei finally speaks and says, “...Oookay, sooo *clearly* there’s some family business y’all gotta take care of. *I’m* just gonna go back home and... figure out my next move. I’ll see y’all later.” Without another word, Issei transforms into a white bat and flies away.

Thomas, despite his heart tensing up after hearing what the peoni hunter had to say, steps up and creates a sphere of light and holds it up, making sure everyone can see him. “Issei, is right,” Thomas starts, “After the events of today, it is time to go back home and recover. Girls, I know that you’ve all been through a lot at once, but please try to continue your week as if nothing happened. Rose...Usiku... I pray that you two will be able to overcome this patch of gray. If you need any help, you can let me know for my purpose as an Upendelaiki is to lead you back into the light.” He softly smiles despite Rose still crying and Usiku not taking his eyes off of her.

Thomas then looks at Amethyst and Alexander and says, “Amethyst, Alexander and I will meet you back at the apartment. Right now, he and I have some unfinished business to take care of.”

“...Okay...” Amethyst responds softly.

Thomas looks at the seven bats that still hang onto the tree branches, and speaks up, “Ladies! If you can, could you please teleport everyone out of the forest? I’m afraid that it has gotten too dark for their safety...” With no squeaks, the bats fly around, choosing who to teleport where. Two bats teleport Rose and Usiku back to their house; four bats teleport Tenacity, Melissa, Jacqueline, and Nermal back to Tenacity’s and Melissa’s vehicles; and one bat teleports Amethyst back to her apartment. Kendo watches everyone disappear into the red sparkling magic, and sees only the bats remaining.

Kendo walks up to the bats and says in a flirty tone, “Aaawwww, what about me~?”

*HHHSSSS!!!!* The bats express their disgust towards the chaotic being, and they teleport away from the area. Kendo snickers at their response, and he walks into the cave, humming a random tune.

Alexander and Thomas watch him walk into the cave, Thomas looks in puzzlement while Alexander looks in disgust. “Um, Kendo, what exactly are you doing?” Thomas asks.

“Ooh nothing~!” Kendo says cheerfully in the cave, “Just grabbing something real quick~!” A few seconds later, he comes out with *The Reaper’s Contract*. “Well, I’ll see you two, later~. Have a nice night, besties~!”

But before Kendo makes his exit, Alexander says, “You fucking asshole...”

Thomas’ heart jumps, and he looks at his twin in surprise. “Alex,” he exclaims.

Kendo looks at Alexander with a pouty lip and says, “Me? A ‘fucking asshole’? What did I do, vanilla bean~? Well, *besides* having you guys fight for my freedom earlier.”



“You *knew* Rose would break down, didn’t you?!” Alexander exclaims, “That’s why you revealed that information. You *knew* that it was Usiku’s place to tell his daughter his truths, but you *and* Cerberus have ruined it for him, you apathetic peoni!!”

“...Alex, was it? Let’s get real here,” Kendo says in a monotone voice, his pout nonexistent, “Did *I* ruin Usiku’s relationship with his daughter, or did he do that all by himself? You heard the broken lady... Usiku hasn’t said *anything* about me *or* you *or* Amethyst since the day she was born. She doesn’t even know her grandparents. She doesn’t know who her family is. She doesn’t even know who her father is because he believes that if he lets her see even a glimpse of his former morbid nature, she will not see him as the ‘loving and gentle daddy’ she grew up with anymore. Don’t you get it? Tell me, Alex...***do you know what Usiku was doing here in the states?***”

“I...I...I don’t know...” Alexander answers.

“Of course you don’t know... ***because you were cooped up in South Africa... taking care of his parents...***” Kendo reveals.

“Usiku ran away and we didn’t know where he went. It was a blessing that we found him again,” Alexander says firmly, not trying to show an ounce of hesitation.

“And what did you see when you saw him again?”

“...That same quiet, scared, and distant little boy... I know that Usiku went through changes, but I can tell that he was still that innocent child that I-”

***“HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA~!! You really think that Usiku was still connected to THAT Usiku? Hahahahaha! You need to get your eyes checked because when I met him...all I saw was anger. Confusion. Sadness. The same emotions that I saw within his daughter. Perhaps you thought he still had some sort of ounce of light left because he was with***

Delilah by that time. I'll admit, she *did* give Usiku some sort of humanity and nothing but unconditional love. But trust me, Alex... ***there was a point in time that Usiku's light was snuffed out... and you know exactly who is responsible for that.***"

"So...then..."

"There you go~. You're understanding now~. *Sighs* Poor Usiku... he thought he broke the chains of sorrow and isolation that has entrapped his family for generations... only to realize that he hasn't broken shit..."

"..."

"Besides, it's because of this revelation, we now know that our precious friend, Rose, has been having nightmares. I'll let you choose which to worry about. In the meantime, I better go find my other bestie. I'm sure he's still around this place somewhere. Toodles~!" Without saying another word, Kendo transforms into a leopard, grabs the book with his mouth, and runs off.

Thomas looks at Alexander, seeing despair fall upon him. "Brother?...What was that about? What was Kendo implying just now?"

"...I'll explain later..." Alexander croaks out.

"...I was going to ask how Kendo even knew all of this information, but he is the devil's son, so I'm just going to settle with 'he has his ways'," Thomas says, although making a mental note to question Kendo when he gets the chance. "But he does have a point...Rose's dreams are quite concerning. Hmmm... let's worry about our friends after we take care of this. Alex, it's time that we cleanse this cave so that none of this happens again. And after this... we're going to get your original appearance back."

**Chapter 2**  
**The Beginning**  
**June 2017**  
**Early Morning**

Kendo walks to the camping entrance once again in the Spirit Realm, eating an extra cheesy slice of pizza, the greasy pepperoni and ham falling off as he takes another bite. “Mmmm~” Kendo moans out of pleasure as he chews his snack and muffles out, “This is the best pizza I’ve ever tasted~! Pizza Shack better step it up or Dice’s will be crowned #1 pizza in my book~! Anyway, I better check on that portal... make sure that they haven’t come yet.” He continues eating the pizza in peaceful silence, walking deeper and deeper into the slumbering forest. The jokester finishes off his slice, devouring the seasoned crust with ease. Suddenly, a sanctified presence strikes his heart, and his eyes shoot wide open in surprise. He swallows his food and mumbles, “Whoa... is he here already? My hero is already on the move~? *Gasp* This is great~! Oh I’ve got to see this~!”

Kendo transforms into a gray rabbit and speeds off to the location of his sanctified savior with great haste. *Thump thump thump thump thump!* His small feet beat on the forest ground, trying to push himself closer and closer to his saving grace. His heart joins the beat his feet provide. *Ba-bump ba-bump ba-bump ba-bump!* The energy becomes stronger and stronger, and suddenly, Kendo’s eyes spot a man with brown feathered hair and what looks like business casual clothes. The runaway softly gasps and whispers, “*That’s him~!*” Not wanting to attract any attention, despite the potion still in effect, Kendo climbs onto a tree where he can see the face of his hero. However, along with a sight of the Upendelaiki’s side profile, there’s also another view...a fuzzy one. Kendo’s face scrunches up and his eyes squint as he tries to figure out who it is. He scans the hairy, otherworldly creature in the shape of a warthog, and then *BA-BA-BUMP!* “Wait a minute,” Kendo mutters, trying to contain his anxiety, “What the hell is Prosciutto doing here!?”

Kendo's ears twitch as he hears the Upendelaiki talk to Prosciutto; he says cheerfully, "There you are! I knew I could find you! What are you doing here?" Kendo watches the naive Upendelaiki approach the warthog with ease. Kendo's heart begins begging him to do something, but his overly cautious brain orders him to stay back, hoping that the Upendelaiki will not waste too much time with Prosciutto. "Well...you're not Thomas or Amethyst, but it's good to have *someone* out here with me," the pure man says to the spiritual being. The Upendelaiki kneels down and gently pets the non-violent warthog, and Prosciutto snorts quietly.

"*No no no,*" Kendo whispers, "*What are you doing!?*" Kendo helplessly watches the scenario play out, not trying to add himself to it just yet, but he is not loving the path it's going down.

"Well, even though this chase was pointless, it was kinda fun! Um...do you mind staying with me for a little bit? My brother should be here at any moment," the man asks Prosciutto. Kendo keeps in mind the two names he just heard. Thomas. Amethyst. Who are they? Can they do anything to stop this from getting any worse?

As soon as the Upendelaiki asks Prosciutto the question, a familiar voice chimes in. "Now!" Within seconds, right before the Upendelaiki and Kendo could figure out where the voice came from, *Bonk!!* Kendo witnesses Gamma knocking out his savior with a bat made of dark magic, the black and dark-red colors swirl around the weapon. Beta walks out of the dark as well, examining their victim. Kendo's heart begins aching, his brain pounds intensely trying to find a solution, and all his feet are thinking about is running. What can he do? What should he do? The runaway's only ticket to freedom has now been compromised, and he can either let the Cerberus Brothers take him away, or stop them. Suddenly, he remembers the Upendelaiki mentioning two other people. Kendo's body is frozen from the sight of his captors only taking a day to get to his location, but the idea of warning the other people about the incident and maybe even getting

them to help warm his body up. Immediately, Kendo hops off the tree silently to where Beta or Gamma couldn't hear him, and he speeds down the forest floor in search of Thomas and Amethyst.

He hops away from the scene, trying to look for another source of pure energy. His feet guide him as his heart navigates through the forest, but suddenly, his eyes land on an Upindeoni with red hair. He immediately slows down and hides behind a tree. He tries to get a good look of the evil man, and he instantly recognizes him. Pierre. *What the fuck is HE doing here!?* Kendo curses in his mind. His sight becomes hazy from the overflow of uneasiness, and his lungs begin begging for oxygen, despite the air being filled with the hellish vibes he was trying to escape from. The sinister laughs from his father begin playing in his mind, clouding up his brain from finding another solution and setting up Plan B. He transforms into a falcon, and immediately flies away from the scene, his eyes slowly welling up with tears filled with burning rage and stinging despair as he suffocates from hopelessness. No thoughts come to mind as the winds brush against his face harshly. All he could think of is two words: run away.

...

**Present**  
**July 2017**  
**Early Morning**

As Kendo carries *The Reaper's Contract* through the dark forest in his leopard form, he thinks about how much craziness and entertainment the book has brought to his life, the negative feelings that overtook him at the beginning being replaced with joy and happiness. He looks at the star studded sky and the moon still wide awake, waiting for her lover, the sun, to return and bathe the world with her warm light. Kendo's heart beats happily at the beautiful sight as his eyes digest the view. He drops the book and transforms back to his human form, and he picks up the

book. “Hmmm,” Kendo ponders, “I should show this off to Pierre... see if he ever heard of this~! Gives me a good reason to go see him!”

Suddenly, *arf arf arf arf!!* Kendo’s head jerks towards the sound of a familiar bark.

Immediately, he sees his best friend, Diablo, run towards him with his purple tongue out. *Arf arf arf arf arf!! Pant pant pant pant pant!*

“Diablo~!” Kendo calls out, and he gets on his knees, ready to embrace his favorite gray pitbull. Diablo runs into Kendo’s arms, and Kendo tightly hugs him, giving the dog enough room to lift his head and kiss his friend’s cheek. “Awww, Diablo, it’s so good to see you again~!” Kendo gleefully says.

*Arf! Arf arf! Whimpers...*

“I know I know, it’s been too long,” Kendo whines, nuzzling Diablo, “But don’t worry, it’s all over now~! Cerberus ran back to Umu scared! Pierre is... somewhere... No matter, I’m free~! For real, this time!! Hahahahahaha~!!”

Diablo removes himself from the embrace to dance around to celebrate his friend’s freedom. *Arf arf arf! Awoooooooooo!!*

“Hahahahahaha,” Kendo laughs cheerfully, his feet becoming as light as a feather and he begins dancing with Diablo. “Oh, Diablo, do you wanna come with me? I’m looking for Pierre right now. I wanted to mess with him for a little bit before I go do my own thing.”

*Arf arf arf!! Arf arf arf arf!* Diablo stops dancing as he positions himself, and he begins coughing and gagging, trying to push out something from his void for a stomach. Kendo watches his friend retrieve another slimy ‘gift’, and Diablo successfully spits up a wind instrument. Kendo softly gasps, recognizing exactly what the instrument is.

“Holy shit... isn’t that Pierre’s!?” Kendo exclaims, grabbing the instrument, examining it while ignoring the slimy saliva. He summoned flames on one of his hands to get a better view.

He holds the flame close enough to the instrument and sees that it is a bronze recorder.

“Woooooow,” Kendo says, “Yep, it’s Pierre’s. Did he seriously try to complete his mission *without* the main item that helps him with his work?”

*Arf arf arf arf arf arf!*

“...Wait, who was his target again?? Uuuuuuh... oh, Amethyst, was it? But she’s... not Umu... so even if he did have this, it wouldn’t work.”

*Arf arf arf arf!! Whimpers... whines...*

“You took it because he was using it against you?! That son of a bitch, it’s not your fault that his pet akita is so beautiful!”

*Whines...*

“Ooooh okay. Aaaaaawwww, don’t worry, boy, I’ll let him know you’re sorry and arrange a date with you and the lovely Adessa!”

*Arf arf arf!! Pant pant pant pant!*

Kendo lets out a sigh while still holding the slobbery recorder as he gets back up and stretches, and he says, “Well, knowing that Pierre’s recorder is pretty much useless if it’s the chocolate kiss that he’s going after makes things easier. I should clean it up first then go ahead and give it back to him. I’ll see you later, Diablo! Love you, boy~!”

*Arf arf arf arf!* Kendo hugs Diablo once more and plants a kiss on the pitbull’s head, and the two buddies separate, Kendo running through the forest while holding *The Reaper’s Contract* and Pierre’s recorder and Diablo running the opposite direction, going on his own adventure.

...

*Rip! Shred! Shred! Shred!* A medium-beige man with garnet-red hair rips a poster of a black cat that has the top saying “MISSING” off a street light and tears it up to many pieces. He sighs as he watches the pieces fly away. *This would have been much easier if I had my recorder*, Pierre complains to himself, *I still don't know where that blasted instrument is at*. After a couple of seconds, he walks to a nearby McDonald's. *Is this the same restaurant that Upendelaiki took me to*, he ponders to himself. *Eh, whatever, I need to catch a break. Took me hours to get rid of those posters.*

He orders a vanilla soft serve ice cream and sits down at a booth by himself. *This is a disaster*, He thinks to himself. *I can't go back home without Amethyst. If I don't capture her, it's bye-bye to that house I was looking into getting*. He goes through his pocket, and he pulls out a folded picture. As soon as he's about to unfold the piece of precious memory, Kendo slides into the seat opposite from him.

“Hey, Pierre~!” Kendo says with a cheesy smile and a tray full of chicken nuggets and fries and a large Spritz. Pierre looks at Kendo with a blank expression, not saying a word. “Oh c'mon, are you not happy to see me~?” Kendo whimpers.

“No, I'm not,” Pierre says bluntly, putting away his picture. “What the hell do you want? Unless you're here to tell me that you're going to help me capture Alex's feline ‘playmate’, I suggest you make yourself scarce.”

“Oh come on, Pierre, mon ami~!” Kendo whines.

Pierre mutters, “I don't speak French-”

“I have two, counting two, gifts for you, mon cherie~!”

“Goddamn it, Kendo, I just said-”



“Gift #1... dun-dun-dun~! Bam~!” Kendo places a bronze recorder, the light coming from the restaurant making the golden flakes shimmer. Pierre’s eyes widen, making his light pink irises sparkle, and he immediately snatches the recorder off the table.

“Where did you find this!? I’ve been looking for it for who knows how long!” Pierre exclaims.

“Shhhhhh, *we’re still in Gaia~*” Kendo whispers.

Pierre mutters, “...You’re the one that just put it there on the table like no one was gonna see it-”

“Diablo gave it to me~” Kendo answers.

“...Diablo took my only way of communicating with animals...and gave it to you...” Pierre says.

“Yep~” Kendo says back.

“.....Kendo, what the fuck were you going to do with my instrument?”

“Mmm, which one~?”

“I’m going to kill you.”

“It’s not that *I* wanted to use it. Diablo took it away from you because you wouldn’t let him see your pet akita.”

“Kendo, I don’t have time for Diablo impregnating Adessa...*AGAIN*. It was a pain in the ass selling them damn pups, and even after doing that, all of the blood rubies had to go to repairs because Diablo trashed my house AND damaged my fence!!”

“Shhhhhh!! You’re getting loud!”

“Matter of fact, now that you’re running around here free, Diablo can stop coming to my space.”

“Awwww, but I trusted you with him while I was imprisoned...”

“And now you’re not. Don’t worry about paying me, completing my mission will make up for all of it, *and this recorder is going to help me...*”

Kendo notices Pierre’s motivation increasing, but he tilts his head from the confusion. Knowing that Pierre’s recorder only communicates with Umu animals yet the Upindeoni is confident that it will help get Amethyst is not making sense. Nonetheless, he continues the conversation, not raising any suspicion, “No problem~! And don’t worry, I cleaned it~. Oh! But I’m not done yet, mi amor~!”

“Seriously? What makes you think that I speak Spanish?”

“Gift #2! Dun-dun-dun-duuuun~! Bam~!” Kendo places a black book on the table, and he starts eating his food. Pierre grabs the book and looks at the title. *The Reaper’s Contract*. As Pierre looks at the book, he realizes that it’s the same book that Alphonse was reading.

“...Okay, why are you giving *this* to me?” Pierre asks, raising one of his eyebrows.

“Just look at it~!” Kendo insists, “I’m actually curious as to what’s in it, but I’m trying to stray away from that evil shit so...ya know, just give me the gist of the story~!” Not asking another question, Pierre opens the book. He scans through the pages, not really trying to observe the information that the book had to offer despite Kendo being curious. He takes only a second to look at whatever images are inside, and he flips to the last page of the book, noticing how the entire page is dark red. Suddenly, *baa-bump! Baa-bump!* Looking at this particular page stops Pierre from doing anything else. Suddenly, his mind becomes more of a blank canvas the more it pounds. Then, out of nowhere, Pierre hears something, or more like someone.

*“Brothers and Sisters, tonight is the night that we finally go see our Lord Lucifer. Before we begin our travel, let me say that I am proud of my son here, and I am glad that he could*

*help me plan this celebration. We will first stamp our fingerprints onto this blank page of the contract. This will symbolize our agreement that we devote our souls to our Master. Then, we will sing our Departure hymn. We will then take our daggers and pierce our hearts as a way to release our souls from this fleshy vessel. We will no longer be bound to this desolate place filled with hypocrites. As Lucifer's followers, we understand that the darkness is where we belong. We will see these hypocrites of the light fall to their demise while they see us triumph. Now then, without further ado, let us begin..."*

***Baa-bump!! Baa-bump!!*** “*Uurrrkk!!*!” Pierre groans and hisses as he holds his head with his two hands. Kendo looks at his Upindeoni friend in awe as Pierre starts breathing heavily.

“Hmmm?” Kendo says, tilting his head while eating more nuggets. He mumbles, “You good? You look like you’re having a brain freeze.”

“*Pant... pant... pant... Get that book away from me!!*!” Pierre hisses out as he shoves the book off the table, accidentally knocking his ice cream off as well. *Thud! Ker-splat!* The book and ice cream land on the white marble floor. “*Pant... pant... pant... I-I need to go...*”

“Huh?” Kendo asks, swallowing his food, “But I was going to tell you how I used this book to get our new friends’ attention!”

Pierre stumbles out of his seat, and he tries to walk to the exit. However, his brain banging against his skull makes his legs go weak, and he crumbles to the floor, groaning in pain. A worker notices this, and asks, “Hey, uuh, are you good, dude?” Kendo’s eyes widen as he watches Pierre struggle. Completely ignoring his food, he gets up to grab the book and then wraps Pierre’s arm around him to carry him out of the restaurant.

“He’s fine~!” Kendo giggles nervously, “He’s just having a major migraine, is all~”

“Oh... ookay...” the worker says, nonchalantly.

Kendo and Pierre make it outside, a few feet away from the restaurant, where the cool, summer breeze caresses the two Umuites. Pierre inhales the cool air, feeling his compressed head release some pressure. His breathing becomes steady now, and he stands up straight, continuing to take in the fresh air. “Yo, what was *that* all about?” Kendo asks.

Pierre looks at the chaotic jokester and growls out, “*I don’t know, you tell me!!*”

“Look, I know that I be intending for bullshit to happen 99.999% of the time, but this time, I *genuinely* don’t know what happened just now,” Kendo explains.

“...Give me that book...” Pierre says softly.

“Huh? Are you sure?” Kendo asks.

“Yes, give me the damn thing, now!”

“Okay okay, shit!”

Without asking anymore questions, Kendo gives Pierre *The Reaper’s Contract*. Pierre holds onto the cursed book tightly, not trying to look at it. Kendo holds out Pierre’s bronze recorder and says, “Hey, red velvet, you forgot your precious instrument.” Not saying another word, Pierre snatches the recorder away from him, grabs out a black pouch that has been crumpled in Pierre’s pocket, and places the recorder in the pouch. He pulls the pouch’s strings so that it closes tightly, and then he ties a set of longer strings that are attached to the pouch around his neck loosely so that it can be worn like a necklace.

“...Amethyst is going to have to wait,” Pierre says calmly. He looks at the midnight black book once again. He notices how there’s an eye outlined in gray and the title engraved in bronze. Before triggering anything else within, he stops and looks up at the night sky, the stars being covered by the dark clouds. He lets out a sigh and says, “For now... I need to figure out what the hell just happened to me...”

“Well, shouldn’t you rest for the night, red velvet?” Kendo asks.

“Kendo, where exactly am I going to sleep?” Pierre asks, furrowing his brow.

“There’s this half-decent hotel you could ‘haunt’ for the night,” Kendo suggests.

“...And that is where?”

“Follow me into the Spirit Realm~” Kendo says softly. And without another word, Kendo and Pierre look around their surroundings, making sure that no humans are around. Confirming that there are no humans around their area, they disappear into the Spirit Realm, and Kendo transforms into a crow while Pierre summons his leathery wings. They take flight to the hotel that Kendo had mentioned.

As they’re in the sky, Pierre thinks to himself. *Just what was that? Was that a memory? Was it my memory? I never thought it was possible to remember your Past Life...if that’s what I’m dealing with right now. Whatever is going on, I know it’s going to irritate me if I don’t figure it out. After I rest, I gotta find the nearest library...maybe it’ll have some more information for me.*

### Chapter 3

Morgana walks around her office, pacing back and forth as thoughts of Kendo run through her mind. She rests her hand on her chest, trying to calm her nerves, but urges to try to contact Kendo before calling Aidoneus' friends becomes stronger. Suddenly, *riiiiiiiiiiiiiing!!* Her black office phone kills off her distraction, and she answers, "Morgana speaking....Hello again, my Lord... Oh, I haven't gotten the chance to contact them yet. I was just cleaning up my space before I did anything...Yes, I'm okay, sir... Well... No no, I can handle my job, sir...Okay... Please let me know if you need anything, sir... Bye." She hangs up and lets out a long sigh. "Ken," she says under her breath, "I hope you're doing okay... I better not see you come back here...*sighs*...Although I miss you..." She feels a tear form in her right eye, but she immediately wipes it away. She sits back down on her desk, letting the plush rolling chair comfort her behind and back. She takes a deep breath in and out, and she picks up the phone to dial up one of Aidoneus' friends.

...

The Wrath District, a place in Umu where everyone sees red and everything is red. The seven moons that hang in the sky have a vibrant red glow, making all of the buildings and architecture illuminate the color of wrath. peonis and Upindeonis walk around the city, either looking for the nearest bar to drink or the nearest fight club. Two peonis can be seen walking out of a club as they argue. Two groups who wear different attire irritate each other to the point they grab their weapons and start duking it out in the middle of the street, blood flying everywhere and peonis gathering around to watch.

A few huge gray and silver carriages travel throughout the district, avoiding the drama, and a few peonis in the carriages stare at the buildings in awe. As the coach slows the white horses so that the peonis can enjoy the scenery, a person next to him speaks into a megaphone and says,

“Welcome, newcomers, to the Wrath District! Here, you are free to unleash your rage in any way you want to~! Cuss up a storm~! Punch someone’s face~! Stab someone’s mother~! Do whatever the fuck you want as long as it’s out of anger~! There are many bars you can go to, and they provide a variety of drinks that’ll let you unleash that rage with ease~. And then there are clubs you can go to and watch dumbasses beat each other up for whatever reason~. There are a lot of gangs out here so try not to irritate them too much....or do, ahahahaha~!”

The horses pass by a few Upindeonis who bump into each other and start cussing each other out; some of the newcomer-peonis laugh at the scuffle, while others look away in disinterest. Some take out their cameras or phones to either record what they’re seeing or take pictures. They pass by some statues of Onis in different poses while holding their weapons. The tour guide continues, “Ah yes, the Onis~! They are found everywhere in this district because that is what the Wrath Quphanto calls his people. Now, you may notice that the peonis around here don’t necessarily carry around such miraculous weapons or wear so much armor or wear such terrifying masks, but the statues are wearing this attire because the Wrath Quphanto loved how the humans depict his followers. Some of the Onis here even made merchandise, so now anyone in the Wrath District can look like what the humans are familiar with and give them a good scare~!” The peonis say their oo’s and ah’s as they take more pictures and make a note to visit the nearest store to buy their own Oni attire.

They get to the outer part of the city, and get to a huge tower made out of garnet. The newcomer-peonis feel like they are about to break their neck trying to look at the entirety of the tower as the carriages circle around it. The tour guide looks at the tower and says, “Welcome to the center of the district~! Without this place, it would be bye-bye to the beautiful red hue that takes over everything here~! This also sends the radiation of the sin throughout this place. So

what's protecting us from going crazy? I'm glad you asked! The carriages that we're in have a special spell surrounding them, keeping you all from being influenced, so you're welcome! This tower is the home of the Wrath Quphanto, Abigor. He rarely shows his face to the public, even his own followers don't see him for a long time. The only time we ever really see him is if someone in this district tries to force a different Sin onto others, which rarely happens, or at the Colosseum where he holds his tournaments. The tournaments give the gangs around here a moment to shine and gain reputation! They're pretty fun to watch, so whenever you hear about the next tournament you should give them a try~!"

At the top of the tower, inside a penthouse, an extremely tall fair-skinned man watches the carriages in his silky, gold robe. He glares at the newcomers and lets out a frustrated sigh, making his dark-orange tiger ears twitch and his dark orange tiger tail sway as he taps his tiger foot furiously. "More peonis, huh? How much do I wanna bet that only a few of them will want to be my Onis..." He walks away from the window and to a counter decorated with numerous alcoholic drinks. He grabs for a dark red bottle that has the word 'High Road' and the number '666' on it. He twists the brown cap that is designed with skulls off the bottle, and he pours the distilled red liquid into his short glass. He takes a sip, letting the burning sensation travel down his esophagus. He coughs a little bit, but takes a deep breath of relaxation. He scratches his full red beard and runs his fingers through his wavy garnet-red hair, trying to stay calm. He walks to the fireplace, looking into the flames. "So many peonis can feel wrath... but it's rarely ever strong enough... not what I look for in an Oni," he talks to himself, taking a sip. "And then the humans who have the potential end up being dumbasses who think their wrath is for good and try to enter Maza, only to become one of the Fallen..." he looks at the fire, and his heart beats harder and faster at the fact that the flow of Oni coming to the Wrath District has slowed down.



His wine red eyes glow, and he starts growling, baring his fangs. He throws his glass into the flames, and the flames dance wildly from the remaining alcohol that was in the cup. “*Stupid humans...*” he growls out.

Suddenly, *beep beep beep beep beep beep beep!* The ferocious man stomps to the telephone, his huge tiger feet echoing throughout the penthouse along with the ringing of the golden corded telephone. He presses the speaker button, and says in his low dry voice, “*Speak...*”

“*Master Abigor? This is Morgana.*”

“*Sighs...* What does Aidoneus want?” Abigor groans out.

“*I’m not interrupting anything, am I?*”

“No... Now on with it.”

“*Lord Aidoneus is wanting you to come to a meeting.*”

“...About what, exactly? And if it’s about his son, I’m not coming. He should have given up on that little bastard a long time ago.”

“*I actually don’t know what the meeting is supposed to be about specifically, but he did tell me that he’ll be discussing some sort of event that he will be holding at the Colosseum.*”

“An event at the Colosseum?” Abigor’s ears twitch at the new information. What kind of event would Aidoneus be holding at the Colosseum? He ponders on the many theories that come up in his head. Then, after a few seconds, he says, “Is he already wanting to initiate his ‘Master Plan’?”

“*To be honest, sir, I’m not so sure.*”

“Hmmm... well, if it’s an event that’s happening at the Colosseum, it *has* to be something intriguing... *sighs* Very well, tell Aidoneus that I’ll be there...”

*“Very good, sir. I’ll relay the message to him. See you soon, Master.”*

*Boop!* Abigor ends the call and dials up the front desk, informing the worker-peonis to prepare his ride. He walks to his gold monograph to play some slow jazz music as he walks to his enormous closet to see what he is going to wear for the meeting. *This better be worth my time, Aidoneus,* Abigor thinks to himself.

**Chapter 4**  
**The Beginning**  
**June 2017**  
**Morning**

Kendo continues flying in desperation, not sure where to go. Tears blur his vision as he travels through the skies aimlessly. *This can't be*, Kendo's soul cries out, *This can't be how my new life starts off. I truly want to be done with this game.* He gives up on flying and lets his body dive down to the ground. Right before his body hits the ground, he transforms into a big, brown bear, and then *thud!* His huge body crashes onto the grassy ground not too far from the highway. He rolls onto his back and looks at the crisp blue sky, getting lost in the many designs of the fluffy clouds that pass by. Kendo mumbles, "Maybe if Pops didn't add the padded room... or the...well, everything... I wouldn't mind playing again and again like we've been doing... but now..." The sorrow that overflows in his heart begins to tighten his throat, and his brain begins replaying all of the times his father would attempt to break him and manipulate his mind to work for his plans, but every memory that plays has no imagery... just darkness... and his voice... his words. Wasting no time, the memories begin attacking his brain, and his head begins to pound, forcing Kendo to grab his head with his huge paws, and he begins growling in pain.

The agony forces him to transform back into his human form, and he hugs himself tightly, trying to catch his breath as he tries to save himself from drowning in the darkness. *Pant. Pant. Pant. Pant.* He gets up from the ground, trying to stretch and get some oxygen to his brain. He looks around, seeing cars pass by peacefully. The wind begins blowing, trying to ease his pain. He says softly, "Oh man, that wind feels amazing... but it's not enough..." He sees another car speeding down the road, and his eyes can't help but follow it. As the car gets smaller the further it goes, his eyes notice a sign he's been standing in front of this entire time. It reads 'Welcome to Forestopolis'. "Huh, I didn't see this earlier," Kendo says, "Fitting name... It seems like this city

thrives in trees no matter where I go.” Suddenly, something clicks in his mind. “Wait a minute,” he says in a low tone, “Forestopolis... isn’t... isn’t this where that peoni hunter lives!? Oh man, why didn’t I just go to him first!?” After making that realization, Kendo transforms into a gray wolf and runs off into the city. “Time to initiate Plan B~! Find Issei the peoni hunter and have him get rid of Cerberus~! And then, I’ll finally be able to live my life devil-free~!!”

...

**Present**  
**July 2017**  
**Morning**

Issei sits at a brown wooden table in the quietest place in Forestopolis’s town square, The Shrouded Library. The Shrouded Library is a large library filled with many books, and believe it or not, there is a huge selection of books about the mythical creatures that reside in Gaia. However, those books are written in ways that humans believe that they’re just fairy tales, when in reality, they’re history books telling the past in a different perspective. Who are the authors of these books? It’s never said. The librarian will tell you that the authors of such books love to stay anonymous to keep it interesting, and most of the time, humans will buy it and not consider the work as anything to take seriously. In reality, the librarian herself is a Umrha whose role is to never tell any human about the truths of the mythical beings, including her own people, and to never confirm a human’s suspicions.

Issei reads a book that is titled *The Fallen Angel*. Issei also has another book, titled *Umu’s Savior*, opened. He scans the words on the page he’s on, trying to grasp onto the story that this unknown author is trying to tell. But what interrupts his concentration is *SLAM!!* A book is slammed onto the table, making Issei look up to see who dares interrupt his studying, and he sees a tall medium-beige skinned man with red hair and pink eyes in front of him sitting down. The man sits across from Issei, and he buries his head into the book he brought, *The Reaper’s*

*Contract*. Issei tilts his head as he notices that it's Pierre. *Hmmm? What's he doing here?* Issei asks himself, *And what's that book he's reading?*

Pierre doesn't even notice Issei as he's digging through the words of *The Reaper's Contract*, letting the piece of memory that he experienced earlier replay over and over until something new pops up. Suddenly he hears, "So what are you doing here?" Pierre looks up to see that it's Issei talking at a low level to him.

"I'm minding my business," Pierre mutters towards the peoni hunter, and he goes back to his book.

"Hey, red velvet~ Check this out~ They got a whole erotic novel in here~" another voice says, and it comes from a caramel man with messy black hair. He sits down next to Pierre with a book called *I'm in Love with my Step-Sister*. "I read the summary, and it looks promising~" Kendo says. He then looks to see Issei across from them and gasps and whispers, "*Oh my gosh~! It's one of my besties~!*"

"Hey there, Kendo," Issei says softly, "You got my \$400?"

"*Hm? I don't know what you're talking about,*" Kendo whispers back.

"Oh, then let me refresh your memory. You came to me asking for my help for \$600. You have already paid \$200, and because I managed to keep Cerberus off of you, now it's time to give me the \$400. So cough it up," Issei says in a strict tone.

"*Hmmmmmm... to be fair, it was the **girls** that managed to get Cerberus off of me. Jacqueline was the one that forced them to go home since she fucked up Beta's shoulder.*"

"Oh, so we're going to forget the time we were at the train tracks."

"*Hmmmmmm, you did fight them off for me to escape, buuuuuut-*"

Issei gets out of his seat to lean close to Kendo, his sunset-orange eyes begin glowing, and he whispers with a straight face, “*Unless you want me to change my mind and go ahead and take you **back** to your father, who I bet would pay me much more than you can offer, I suggest you go ahead and give me my \$400...*”

“*Awwwww, don’t be like that, chocolate drop~*” Kendo smirks at Issei, “*I promise I’ll have your money soon~*”

Issei begins baring his fangs and growls, “**No, Kendo, now.**”

Kendo jumps at the change of mood, and not losing eye contact, he whispers, “*I-Issei, my goodness, don’t start showing me your pearly fangs~ You’re gonna make me wanna offer my blood instead~ Mmmmm, I wonder what it would feel like to have you hold me close to your body as you tilt my head to the side, exposing my neck, and you sinking your sharp fangs into my flesh, sending me endless pain while giving me arousal as I also feel your soft lips upon my skin, and then we-*”

“Oh my fucking badness, shut the fuck up and just give the dude his \$400,” Pierre finally speaks, Kendo’s fantasy completely ruining his focus. Kendo looks at Pierre with an annoyed face, and then he rolls his eyes, letting out an exhausted sigh. He digs through his pocket and grabs a thick roll of cash. He manages to give \$400 to Issei, giving Issei a reason to sit back down and regain himself.

“Damn it, Pierre, you just *had* to ruin my one-way ticket to a one-night stand with a vampire...” Kendo whines.

“Issei, you wouldn’t happen to know anything about this book, would you?” Pierre asks Issei, completely ignoring Kendo. Pierre shows Issei the front of the black book, and Issei notices the one eye that is outlined in gray and the bronze engraved title *The Reaper’s Contract*.

Issei looks at the book and says, “Hmmmmmm, I can’t say that I’ve ever seen this book, but if I were to take a guess, it does look like something a cult would have. What is it about?”

Pierre looks at the book and answers, “I... I don’t know, actually. I only glimpsed at the words, but... Ugh, I *guess* I can tell you... let’s just say that a memory popped up when I saw a particular page...”

Issei tilts his head and says, “What? A memory??”

“Mhm... I don’t know if it’s mine, but... it’s something that this book triggered. I didn’t see any images in the memory, it was just a voice. And it sounded much like a cult, and they were celebrating their deaths, basically...”

“Hm... we should probably take this to a private room. We don’t need anybody to hear any of this.”

With that being said, the trio gather up the books they were reading and go up to the librarian to request for a room.

...

Issei, Pierre, and Kendo enter one of the many private rooms this library has to offer. They are now on the second floor where it’s much quieter. The private rooms have thick walls and no windows for anyone to look into, so they are completely isolated. The men sit at a round table, laying down their books. Kendo, however, starts reading his erotic novel, wanting to dive into his fantasy land while also listening into Issei and Pierre’s investigation.

“Okay,” Issei starts, “So it seems that you’ve got a mystery on your hands, Pierre. You got a book that could potentially tell you who you were in your Past Life. Problem is you don’t know where to start. I guess I should ask where you even got this book?”

“Well,” Pierre answers, “This book came from the cave that Cerberus, Alphonse, and I were in when entering this realm. Alphonse found it at Alexander, Thomas, and Amethyst’s campsite and read it all, but I was too focused on my mission to even care about the thing.”

Kendo chimes in, “Until Ken-Daddy managed to recover the book because *I* was the one that actually found it first just so I could give it to the vanilla bean twins. I just wanted to show it to Pierre so that he knows why all of this happened.” He then whines, “I honestly didn’t know that Pierre would react to it the way he did. Otherwise, I’d have never shown it to him.”

“Okay, then Pierre, you said one page activated a memory, and that’s what brought you here,” Issei recaps, “So what’s the page that did it for you?”

Pierre opens *The Reaper’s Contract* and shows Issei the dark red page. He says, “This... This page is covered entirely with blood.” Suddenly *baa-bump... baa-bump*. Pierre squeezes his eyes and breathes heavily as he feels his nerves pulsating once more. He groans out, “That same voice keeps ringing in my head as I look at this page. It keeps talking about a celebration of seeing Lord Aidoneus, and what the celebration consists of. This group stamped their fingerprints onto this page using their blood... and then they sang some hymn... and then they stabbed themselves as a way to ‘free their souls’.”

“....So basically, they did a mass suicide just to see my Pops,” Kendo says in a blank tone.

“Yes... I think their goal was to become peonis... but... why?” Pierre ponders.

“Well, *you’re* an Upindeoni,” Issei points out, “Why did *you* become one of Umu?”

“I really don’t know. Being honest with you, I woke up in Spirit Realm just having the feeling that I deserved to go to Umu. Maza wasn’t even a thought. It was all just... natural... I didn’t ask any questions or even just think about what I was doing. I just... did it. And I was accepted,” Pierre explains.



“Hm... and there was no one else with you?”

“Mm-mm... just me, myself, and I.”

“Hmmm... well, we *could* go ahead and say that this memory is indeed yours, but that piece of evidence is too vague. You could have done anything terrible in your Past Life and possibly knew that you didn’t have a chance in Maza, which you would be right.”

“Hey, why don’t you read the book from the beginning?” Kendo asks, “You’re not going to make progress if you keep looking at that bloody page.”

Not saying anything else, Pierre flips to the beginning of the book and begins reading.

*Dear Brother or Sister,*

*Welcome. This book is named “The Reaper’s Contract” because if you study this book and follow its teachings, the Reaper will, with no doubt, grant you and your followers a one-way ticket to Umu, where you all are welcomed. If you are reading this message, that means you have been chosen to lead a group of souls to Paradise. As their leader, you must teach them the ways of darkness. They must understand why they are the way they are, and why this world will not accept them so easily. They must accept who they are if they want to achieve eternal peace. This book holds the history of Umu and how it has flourished throughout time thanks to Lucifer, the Upendelaiki who betrayed Maza to bless us with his knowledge of how to keep Umu and the residents who live in this realm strong. You must also teach your fellow brothers and sisters how to become a true peoni. They will learn about the seven sins and the Quphantos of those sins. They do not have to master all seven sins, but it’s looked down upon if they do not commit at least one of them. The next page provides a schedule you must follow. By reading to the very end of this message, you now understand the importance of your*

*role. Many souls will be looking up to you... lead them to the shadowy sanctuary. We will be waiting for your arrival.*

***By reading this message, I, Nolan Avril, understand that I must be the Shepherd of Darkness these black sheep need. I will guide them and protect them from the light that forever wants to hurt us and blind us.***

“Wow... Okay, so we can go ahead and confirm that a peoni wrote this,” Kendo says.

“Yeah,” Issei agrees, “If any of the information that’s in this book is true, then only a peoni would be able to write down such facts about Umu.”

“I wonder why they would lie about the Reaper though?” Kendo wonders.

“What do you mean?” Issei asks, tilting his head a little.

“Well, I actually ran into the guy a few times. They don’t tell the souls where they ‘need’ to go. The most they’ll do is just give the soul directions, but that’s about it.

“Nolan...Avril...Nolan..Avril,” Pierre repeats under his breath, “Why... do I feel like I should know this name...? Nolan... Avril...”

“Hey, red velvet, does that page say anything else?” Kendo asks.

“O-Oh, there is this last part after this Nolan guy signs his name...” Pierre confirms, and reads it.

***This book was given to me on: 01 January, 1899***

***If I were to ever pass away before the Celebration, I will pass this book onto: Pierre***

***Avril(son) and Amber Avril(daughter)***

Suddenly, ***BAA-BUMP!! BAA-BUMP!!*** “*Hiiiiiiiiiiii!! Aaaaaah!!!!*” Pierre tries to mute his screams, but they escape as he holds his head with his hands, trying to keep it from splitting

open from the overload of memories trying to become crystal clear. Kendo and Issei get out of their seats to stand next to Pierre and hold him.

“*Hey! Pierre, what’s going on!?*” Issei whispers, but Pierre responds with only groans of agony.

“*This is **exactly** what he did last night!?*” Kendo points out.

“*A-Avril... M-My name... was Pierre Avril...*” Pierre hisses, “*A-And Nolan... was my father... a-a-a-and Amber... Amber,*” Pierre’s distressing groans become sorrowful whimpers.

“*Shh, don’t say anymore, Pierre. We know that Amber was your sister,*” Kendo whispers.

“*Huff huff huff huff... Amber... Amber...*” Pierre repeats himself through his cries as he catches his breath, sweat drenching him.

“Okay, I think that’s enough reading for the day,” Issei suggests, “So we now know that your family was responsible for creating this cult, your father being the leader.”

“Not gonna lie, this peoni knew how to make his words sound pretty,” Kendo mutters.

“*Huff huff... huff... huff....sigh...*” Pierre’s body finally calms down, his heartbeat slowing down and his head releasing pressure. Not saying another word, he snatches *The Reaper’s Contract* and storms out of the private room. He scampers down the stairs and heads straight for the exit. *I’ve got to get this mission over with,* Pierre orders himself. *The sooner that I bring Amethyst to Lord Aidoneus, the sooner I can go find Amber. She **has** to be somewhere in Umu. I know she is.* He storms out of the library, clutching the ancient book tightly.

“Huh...well, I better go after him, I guess,” Kendo says as he gets up and leaves the room.

Issei watches his former customer leave him behind without saying another word, but he doesn’t give chase. Instead, he gathers the two books that he was reading earlier and leaves the room calmly. He walks down the stairs as he looks at the two books. *The Fallen Malaiki. Umu’s*

*Savior*: “Even though these books will give me a better idea of who Kendo’s father is, I feel like *The Reaper’s Contract* is holding some more important information,” Issei says to himself.

“Could there be something about that cult in the database? Perhaps...” Not saying anything else, he walks straight to one of the computers. He lays the books on the desk, pops his fingers, and starts typing at lightning speed. “Time to figure out what's really going on...”

## Chapter 5

July 2017

Morning

**Tenacity:** *Morning, everyone... are we doing okay?*

**Melissa:** *No, my parents yelled at me for staying out too late and not telling them where I was.*

**Jacqueline:** *What!? 🤔 Even after telling them that we all just went on a camping trip?*

**Melissa:** *So you didn't know that they called your parents, then.*

**Jacqueline:** *....They did??*

**Melissa:** *Yeah, and they said that your parents didn't even know about the camping trip.*

**Nermal:** *That explains the extra saltiness from Jackie's dad then... 🤔*

**Jacqueline:** *Oh come on, is that why he took \$300 off my bank account!?*

**Tenacity:** *Yeah, they called me earlier, and I told them that we did. I apologized for not telling them in hopes that they would get off of you, MeeMee.*

**Melissa:** *They even called Rose's mom, which I guess she caught onto what we were trying to do(thank god) because she told them that she knew about the camping trip.*

**Tenacity:** *Damn... MeeMee, we're so sorry.*

**Melissa:** *Mom's letting it go slowly, but dad's being a little skeptical and is wondering why I didn't just tell them about the trip, and it's like how the fuck am I supposed to tell them that I was actually over here fighting peonies with magic powers that I got from drinking a potion **without** sounding like I might have done shrooms? They would think that shit is a lie, too.*

**Jacqueline:** *Hey maybe you can tell them that we just wanted to explore the woods. 🤔*

**Melissa:** *And give him **more** reason to be worried and on my ass?*

**Nermal:** *Hey, anyone knows how Rose is doing...? 🤔*

**Tenacity:** *I tried calling her, but I didn't get any answer... 💔*

**Nermal:** *Oh no... Maybe she's dealing with her dad...*

**Tenacity:** *Honestly, her dad is being kind of a dick. He shouldn't have set us up like that and then try to leave Rose out of the loop. 🙄*

**Melissa:** *Rose pretty much revealed that her dad has been hiding a lot of stuff from her.*

**Nermal:** *I don't understand why he would do that...*

**Jacqueline:** *A shame he's such a D.I.L.F. too... 😞*

**Nermal:** *What secrets could he have to where he feels like he would have to sacrifice **us**!? 😡*

**Melissa:** *I don't know, but honestly, should we care? If Usiku wants to hold some stuff back, I say let him. Of course, Rose will feel differently about that, and that's fine. What I don't appreciate is him throwing us into the mix. He's half Quphanto, HE could have easily taken care of everything in under a day.*

**Tenacity:** *Prolly would have just taken him under a few minutes if Kendo's story is true.*

**Jacqueline:** *But you know what, honestly, if it wasn't for Usiku, we wouldn't have had so much fun~! Look at where we are now! We got powers, we're saving lives, we're basically sexy superheroes~!! 😁*

**Tenacity:** *Speaking of "fun"... Jackie... seriously, a chainsaw?*

**Nermal:** *Oooh yeeeah, you did create a chainsaw! What was up with that!? I didn't know you could handle something so dangerous! 🤯*

**Jacqueline:** *Oh! I always wanted to use one! ✨ Ever since I played that one game at my cousin's house, I wanted to be a badass chick with a chainsaw! All I needed was bubblegum and a cheerleading uniform! 😁*

**Melissa:** *You ever figured out how your powers became ice to begin with? Even though the potion you took was supposed to give you water powers??*

**Jacqueline:** *Nope! But does it matter!? We're badass superheroes~! 🥰🥰*

**Tenacity:** *I don't know... Maybe this whole thing is deeper than what we think... Rose does have Quphanto running in her veins, and that alone is a big deal. Plus, y'all remember how she explained her nightmares? 😬*

**Nermal:** *That is true!! 🦊 That was crazy! I'm kinda sad that she never told us about them tho... 😞*

**Tenacity:** *Yeah, she hid it this entire time...that's why she's been acting so... different...*

**Melissa:** *Well, to be fair, she's not inclined to tell us every dream that she has...but yeah, I hope I don't ever have the kind of dreams she's having 😬*

**Jacqueline:** *Honestly!! Like imma need for her to tell me what she be eating and drinking before bed so that I don't take that! 🦴*

**Tenacity:** *Well, let's just wait until she says something. MeeMee, are you feeling any better now that you vented a little??*

**Melissa:** *No. I'll text you guys later.*

**Tenacity:** *Alright...*

**Jacqueline:** *Cheer up soon, beautiful~!! 💕*

**Nermal:** *Let's all hang out soon! Rose, if you read this, know that we love you!! 💕*

---

Darkness takes over Rose's surroundings. She walks around aimlessly, trying to find something or someone. She keeps walking until she turns her head and she sees that she's in a living room. No one is around. Only her. She walks around and says, "Hello?", but no one answers her. She walks around the room, trying to find the reason why no one is around, and she walks to an opened window. She looks out to see that a skeleton is sitting on the porch, rocking in an old rocking chair. Rose gasps and whispers, "No...No not again..."

She begins hearing moaning and groaning come from behind her, and she quickly turns around and instantly covers her mouth, witnessing a crowd of men and women with their eyes gouged out trying to find their way around the room. They lean against the walls and bump against furniture as the blood that leaks out of their eye sockets paints their faces and stains their clothes. Rose's heart bounces in her body like a basketball. She ends up seeing a few more people crawl out, displaying their broken legs and bashed in faces, their faces nothing but bloody mush. The jarring sight along with the overpowering smell of blood harassing her eyes and ears cause Rose to cover her mouth tightly and look away before she pukes out her guts.

She quickly runs to the door and manages to open it, leaving the bloodied people in the living room. *SLAM!* She shuts the door, but she turns to see that she's now in a dark forest filled with dead trees, and she looks up to see a crimson-red sky that is covered by blood clots for clouds. She walks at a fast pace, not wanting to take the time to look at what this forest has to offer. She continues walking, until *drip...drip...drip... drip drip drip*. She starts feeling something warm drop on her body. She holds out her hands to check if it's raining, but what she sees instead is cherry-red blood falling onto her palms. She whimpers out, "*Oh my god, no!!*" The blood-rain begins falling at a faster pace, forcing Rose to begin running. Not caring about her heart and lungs suffocating from the desperation and uneasiness, her feet keep rolling like a nonstop high-speed train, trying to find shelter. The clouds begin to cover more of the sky, making it much more difficult for Rose to see, and the only thing helping her navigate now is the occasional lightning. *Pant pant pant pant*. Rose tries to catch her breath, feeling her legs about to give out on her, and the smell of the blood assaults her nose once more. Suddenly, she loses her footing and steps on her foot wrong, sending immense pain to her ankle, and she falls to the

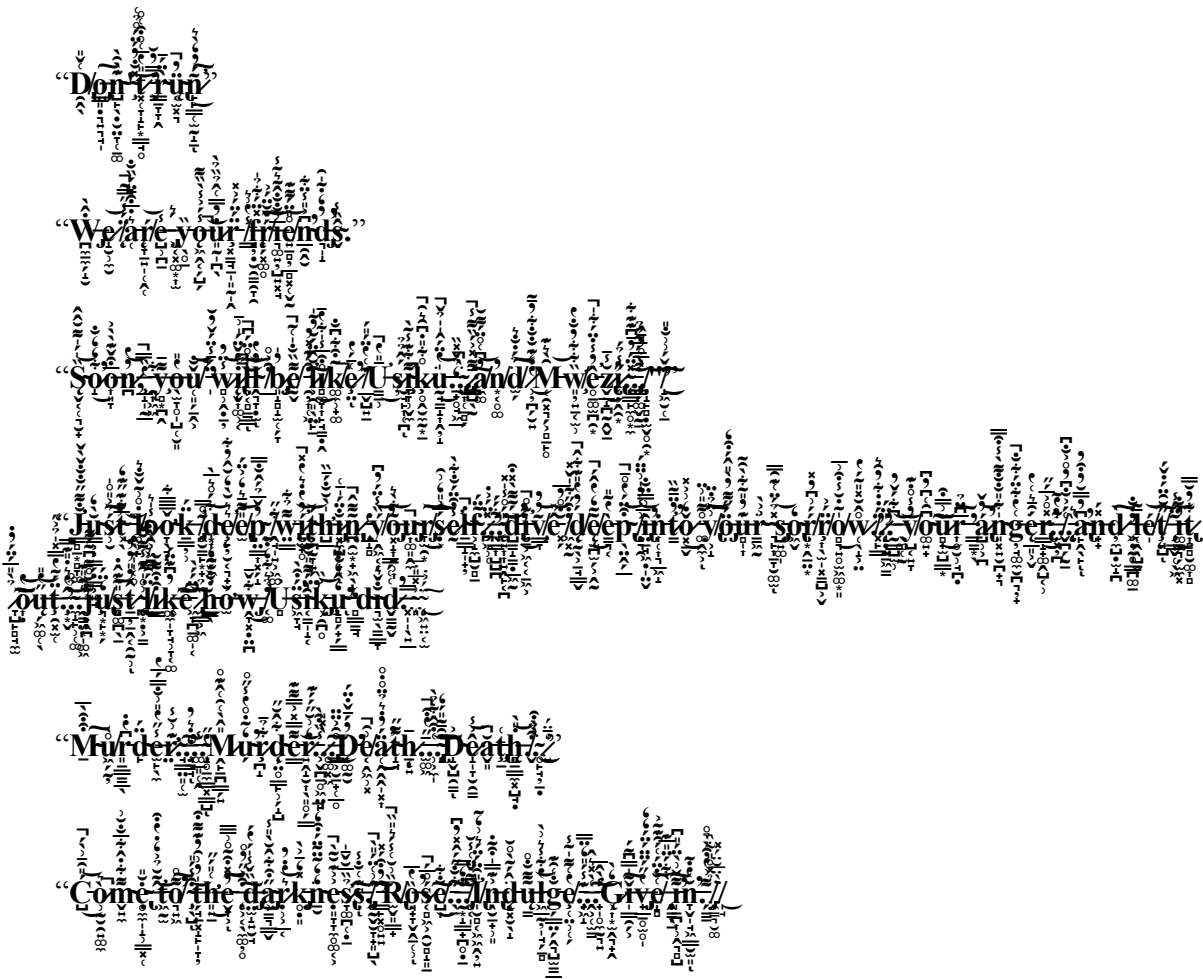


ground. *Thud!!* She wails out, and her screams echo throughout the forest but is then muted by the loud thunder.

She tries to get up, but her ankle fails her. As she prepares herself to try to crawl, she begins hearing footsteps. She turns, and the lightning reveals that a herd of skeletons covered in blood are walking towards her slowly, their eye sockets having a little red glow inside; they mumble out something, but Rose can't hear them through the storm. She lets out a shrilling scream, and she immediately gets to crawling. Not caring about the hard, dirty ground, Rose keeps squirming to get away from the skeletons; lightning strikes again and reveals a dark cottage. Her eyes widen and her heart leaps. She yells out, "HELP!! HELP ME!!! SOMEBODY PLEASE!!!" She gets closer and closer to the safe place, and she continues screaming out her prayer, "PLEASE OPEN THE DOOR!! SOMEONE PLEASE!!! I'M GOING TO DIE!!" She looks back to see the skeletons are getting closer to her, and she keeps crawling despite her arms scorching and her yells most likely muted by the storm along with the skeletons' voices. She makes it to the door, and using her good foot and the door knob, she picks herself up and starts banging the door. *BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG!!! BANG BANG BANG BANG!!!* "HEY!! OPEN UP!!! PLEASE SAVE ME!!!" She sees the door knob wiggling, and her eyes begin beaming, and she yells, "PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE, HURRY!!! THEY'RE COMING FOR ME!!!"

As soon as the doorknob begins to slowly turn, something dense grabs her by the shoulder, and Rose immediately freezes up. The phalanges grip her tightly, and more bone-hands rest on her other shoulder and arms. One of the skeletons rests their skull on her head, leaving Rose feeling the hard structure press against her own skull as if it's trying to merge with her. Her heart begs her to get out of the embrace, but her brain has shut down, not giving her body any

commands. Now that they are close to her, she can finally hear what the skeletons have been trying to say to her. They say in unison...



The combination of the skeletons' voices, what they are saying, and the smell of the bloody storm makes Rose's head spin like an out of control carousel and rotate like a hectic ferris wheel, and Rose would be falling to the ground if it weren't for the skeletons' grip. Their voices become clearer and clearer to her as the door slowly opens; the language slowly transitions to English...and her heart drops.

**"TALK TO US ROSE...WE'LL TELL YOU WHAT USUKU HASN'T...ABOUT YOU...  
ABOUT HIM...ABOUT THE NUKU FAMILY..."**

**“COME TO THE DARKNESS, ROSE...FOR A LITTLE WHILE...EMBRACE THE EMOTIONS THAT USIKU FELT...WHEN HE WAS YOUR AGE...”**

The skeletons continue mumbling and repeating their messages, their voices rippling like an ocean. The door to the cottage reveals a tall man in a cloak, his head hanging low. The skeletons' voice begins to drown out, and Rose can only hear the sound of a beating heart flood her ears. She looks at the tall man and notices him holding a beating heart in one hand and a severed head in the other, the head's spinal cord still attached. Her eyes stay glued to the vile imagery, begging for the man to show his face, and as if he heard her eyes' request, he lifts his head up, revealing his stoic expression, his deep red eyes lifeless yet has a small red glow within his pupils just like the skeletons. Rose sees his eyes and his dark-brown skin, and immediately, she knows who she's looking at. The man looks at her, scanning her face and taking in the sight of fear splattered all over her, and says...

“*φῦμfkiη...*”

---

“Pumpkin...Pumpkin...”

Usiku's soft voice along with his gentle nudges awaken the sweaty and flustered Rose. Rose jolts up and lets out a little squeal as if she finally freed herself from the skeletons' eerie clutches. She whimpers and pants heavily, and her eyes begin to water, her body drenched in sweat, happy that she woke up from the nightmare, but frightened at the fact that it made a comeback. She looks and sees her father sitting next to her, worry shown on his face, and she immediately hugs him tightly, crying. Usiku returns the embrace with the same amount of tightness, not wanting to let his baby go, letting her know that it's okay now. He plants a kiss on

her head, the same spot where the skeleton rested its head. They stay in the warm, comforting hug for what seems like forever, until Rose's cries become gentle snuffles.

Rose disconnects from her father, and Usiku stands up from her bed, and she sees Usiku wearing a long-sleeve black and red dashiki and black dress pants. Usiku has his extremely long locs in a low ponytail and is wearing a long rose quartz beaded necklace that has a rose gold akoma ntoso symbol dangling on it; a lapis lazuli beaded bracelet on his right wrist; and an amethyst crystal bracelet that has a silver mpatapo symbol dangling on it on his left wrist. "Daddy?" Rose says softly, her voice cracking, "What's going on?"

But before he could answer her question, Usiku grabs a bouquet off of her nightstand. The bouquet has pink carnations, white lily-of-the-valley's, white orchids, and yellow and pink tulips. The gentle smell of the flowers caress Rose's nose, healing whatever damage the smell of the blood did in her nightmare.

Usiku looks at the bouquet of flowers, and then tries to hand them to her, saying, "For you, pumpkin..." Rose gently takes the flowers and inhales them, loving how their decent scent is calming her down.

She looks at the flowers' vibrant colors as they bring back saturation to Rose's grungy gray point of view of her world right now. She lets out a sigh and looks at her father and says, "Aww, daddy... All of this is beautiful... but you know how I feel about apologies ...even if they're in the form of these gorgeous flowers, I can't instantly forgive you..."

"I know, my love..." Usiku says, sorrow not leaving his face, "Believe me, I'm not here to waste your time. I just...If I'm going to tell you who I am... I'd like to do so on a father-daughter date."

“...Dad,” Rose tries to refuse the offer, but her body and mind are still busy recovering from her nightmare.

“I’m not going to take you anywhere extravagant... I just want us to walk together in the Garden...” Usiku responds, “...I never got to spend this kind of time with my parents. When I spend time with you and your mom, I am forever basking in the warm light I never thought I needed. Spending time with my mother and father, however... was just the complete opposite...”

“Hm...Why?” Rose asks, noticing the word ‘opposite’ coming out of his mouth, bringing back flashbacks of the skeletons.

“...Would you like to take a walk in the Garden with me... my pumpkin?”

...

### **Mid-Morning**

After taking awhile to clean her face; rid her body of the fright-filled sweats; fix her hair to where it’s a high ponytail; put on an off-shoulder sparkling cotton-candy pink ball gown dress that Usiku picked out for her and a pink rose flower crown along with sparkling light pink heels; and put on a little makeup, Rose finally makes it to the Garden that is located behind the house.

The Garden is huge in size, almost the size of the house. There are more than 20 different types of flowers that bloom here, thanks to Delilah. With Usiku’s help, Delilah was able to achieve her goal of creating a safe space for her family. She always wanted a place where they could take long walks and admire the flowers while talking about anything for hours. There’s plenty of paths to take, and sometimes it can be easy to get lost in the flowery wonderland. However, if just taking a seat and looking at the flowers is the goal, then simply take the straight path where you’ll find the large, white, octagon gazebo that has a round, white table waiting for three(there are extra chairs laying on the side in case of any guests).

“Daddy, why do you have me wearing my old prom dress?” Rose questions her father.

“Because it looks beautiful on you... it always has. Plus, I did say that this would be a father-daughter date,” Usiku answers, softly smiling. He offers her his arm, and she accepts it as she links arms with him, standing close enough to where she can rest her head on him; they finally begin their walk, making sure to go at a slow pace.

“*Sighs* Thanks, daddy... So... tell me about my grandparents. Are they anything like mom’s parents?” Rose asks.

“Not exactly...”

“What do you mean? From what mom told me, her mother didn’t treat her so kindly... and her dad wasn’t around because he passed away when she was little...”

“...If you ask me, I’d rather have her mom than mine...”

“What??”

“At least her mom acknowledged her presence. Mama never even looked at me. I would call for her, yell at her, even cry right in front of her... and she wouldn’t move a muscle for me..”

“Oh my goodness... that’s terrible! So then your dad was...”

“The complete opposite actually... hehe. He begged for a son, and I’m his ‘little blessing’. When he had me, he didn’t hold back. Gave me everything I could ever ask for. He made sure that if anyone was going to spoil me, it would be him.” A soft smile develops on Usiku’s face as he talks about his father, and Rose reflects her father’s emotion, smiling as well.

“Well, at least your dad loved you. Did he try talking to your mom?” Rose asks.

“Well.. he *tried*,” Usiku responds, “... He tried telling her to not be so hateful towards me... and to instead only be hateful towards him. They... were enemies...” Their smiles disappear.

“W-Wait, huh? If they were against each other, then why did they... you know...”

“...Baba wasn’t always a good man... I’m sure there was a point in time when Mama did love him, but after a while, that love just evaporated.”

“Wow... Well, now I understand why you wouldn’t want me to meet grandmother. But... why have I not ever met my grandfather? His relationship with grandmother wasn’t great, but it seems you and him were doing pretty well.”

“*sighs* Here we go.... In order for me to explain why having you around Baba would be a bad idea... I have to tell you about our ‘Godfather’. Darling, the Quphanto that started our family tree was Ubokufa, the Quphanto of Life and Death. He controls how long someone gets to live, when someone has to die, and who gets to have another chance in life on this side of the universe through Reincarnation. The Reapers that roam around this realm are his avatars. He is basically this universe’s manager because without him... this universe probably wouldn’t exist... either that, or it’d be engulfed in complete chaos. When you think of our Godfather, you’re supposed to understand that there’s a balance. And by being blessed with his many abilities, we’re supposed to maintain that balance. However, Rose, for a while now, our family hasn’t been maintaining that role. Someone in our family became power hungry... blinded by their status... and passed it down generation to generation. For my entire life, Baba has taught me the enjoyment of bringing death upon others...”

“.....”

“He... enjoyed... killing... He enjoyed being this world’s ‘Reaper-in-the-Flesh’. And he wanted to pass that on to me... but at a very young age of 10... Mama and Baba never saw me again.”

“...So that’s why grandma... No, she should have stepped up and showed you how wrong that is! You can’t decide who gets to die and who gets to live!”

“Playing Devil’s Advocate, my dear, *you* create different types of insects and give them a purpose... you let them live until they are not useful anymore... and then they are gone forever until you speak them into existence, again...”

“What!? No no no, that’s not what I-”

“My love, it’s okay... you are only doing what you do best, and sadly death comes along with it... What’s important is that you give life and let your creations live out their purpose... something that hasn’t been done in the family for a long time... something that I have never done...”

“Not to sound weird, but daddy, you created me...”

“Hehe... that is true...”

Rose takes in everything that Usiku has told her thus far. Flashbacks of the nightmare begin invading her mind again. The skeletons’ messages about her and Usiku, the skeletons begging Rose to express the emotions she was experiencing in ways that Usiku did. *No*, she thinks to herself, *There’s no way. He makes it clear that he knows his parents are bad influences. Surely, he would never follow the path that his father walked. He left them when he was 10, he HAD to have known better!*

Coming back to the conversation, hoping to confirm her theory, Rose says, “Daddy... is that why you left your home? Because your mom despised you, while your dad basically taught you how to be a murderer? As much as you loved your dad, you had to leave that place since they weren’t teaching you the right things. Oh daddy, I’ll admit, that is a very risky choice to make as a child, but... *sighs* if you were to stay there any longer, who knows who you would have become...”



“Rose...” Usiku stops walking. He looks down at the ground, trying to gather his words. He’s impressing himself with how much he’s told his daughter thus far. There is so much to unpack, and she’s clinging on to every word. However, his heart breaks hearing his daughter still try to paint him like a misunderstood guy, as if he makes these rash decisions with good intentions, like there’s room for redemption when there is none left, he believes.

Rose stands in front of him. “Daddy?” she says softly, “Daddy, it’s okay. Ugh, I’m so sorry... I forced you to do this all because of some stupid nightmares!... I didn’t know that your past would be so desolate... You didn’t deserve any of that treatment. And that’s why you now have me and mama! I also want to say thank you... because now I understand why you raised me to be the Rose I am today...and why you’re just wanting to protect us.” She gives him a warm smile, a little tear forming. She places her hand on his hairy chin and lifts his head, seeing Usiku’s eyes are watery, his blood-red eyes sparkling. “Oh daddy, don’t cry!” she whines, and she quickly hugs him tightly. “This is my fault! I shouldn’t have let those dreams affect me so much! Perhaps they were trying to warn me about grandfather... but after what you just told me, there’s no way they could be talking about you, too! And maybe Kendo only said what he said to mess with me! He is half-Upindeoni after all... but then again, Cerberus did say-”

“*No. No... No no no no...*” Usiku whimpers softly, trying to control his shaky voice.

“Shhhhhh, it’s okay, daddy, I’m here,” Rose says softly, rubbing his back as she hugs him, not wanting to bring up the nightmare or what she has heard from Kendo anymore. She can consider what Alpha has told her because of how he worded his battle with Usiku, he made it sound like it was a simple battle. No one got killed. She can allow herself to believe that. However, Kendo makes it seem like Usiku overdid it and actually ‘took their lives’. Rose nuzzles Usiku, trying to

give him and herself some comforting aura. *You're not a monster, daddy*, she tries to convince herself, *you would never kill*.

*"Please stop... You don't understand, Rose..."* Usiku softly whimpers, gently pushing Rose away from him, the overbearing mixture of negative emotions in the form of skeletons taunting him. They stand behind Rose, and he looks around the garden trying to inhale composure and exhale the 18 year long stress he's been holding within, but he just sees more of his skeleton friends creeping from the bushes and standing near the gazebo, hearing their mumbles and rattles. His heart becomes a ton as they stare him down, waiting for him to cease the hiding. The first time he held back so much of his past, he almost lost the love of his life; he's lucky that she's willing to love him still afterwards. Now, it's time. After 18 long years, it's time to face the facts. When it comes to his daughter, he will not win. No matter what he does, whatever his 'pumpkin' does will always sway his decisions. Usiku really thought that he could hold onto his secrets for long from his precious daughter, but alas here she is ripping him open like a present. He actually enjoyed playing the fatherly persona; seeing his daughter smile and laugh, having her believe that Usiku was always the gentle giant who decided to stay in the house 24/7 just to take care of her, warmed up his soul while also inserting many needles to his heart. However, he digs deep into himself, the little child that was terrified. The child had no choice but to accept the abrupt changes in his life at an early age. The child within him faces Rose once again, and he softly says, *"I didn't want to leave Baba... I didn't want to leave Mama... I was taken away from them..."*

"W-What?" Rose asks, "What are you talking about? You just said-"

*“Baba was of the darkness... Mama was of the darkness... the darkness was all I knew... I loved Baba and Mama, despite Mama’s treatment towards me...and I wanted to **stay in it**...”*

Usiku admits, finally regaining himself, the skeleton friends still holding their stares.

“What are you saying? The darkness? You mean you *wanted* to bring death upon others just like your father!? You wanted to show no emotion or expression of love and care towards others like your mother!?” Rose begins yelling, now taking a few steps away from Usiku, and just like that, the nightmare returns, this time she feels like something is behind her. It’s that same feeling again. She feels the skeletons embracing her and resting their skulls upon her, yet if she were to look around, no one would be physically there. It’s just her and her father. Rose’s heart begins to march.

“That’s exactly what I wanted to do,” Usiku begins, “I wanted to carry on my father’s legacy of being the man that was unstoppable. I wanted to be just as, if not more, powerful than he was. And I would do all of that to earn more of Baba’s love. I wanted to get to the point where Mama would *beg* me to stop and actually acknowledge me, but it would be too late... she would realize the mistakes she’s made and apologize for all that hell she put me through...”

The atmosphere becomes heavy. Parts of Usiku’s former self begin to slowly revive as he lets his explanation hang in the air. Rose’s pupils become smaller, and more tears begin to form as she realizes that she’s in front of the same man she saw in her nightmares. She looks into Usiku’s eyes, and notices they are different now as his blood-red irises lose their shine and a small red glow is inside his pupils. Usiku’s words become daggers. She really wants to see her father as the ‘daddy’ that she grew up with... a man that always tried to do what was best for her and the family. However, that fantasy is slowly tumbling down as Usiku’s former goals are being exposed and the skeletons begin mumbling in her brain; Rose swears she can feel their dry

phalanges caressing her face and playing with her hair, as if they're trying to comfort her, but it's only giving her more terror.

Rose's eyes begin to sting as sharp tears begin to form. This isn't her 'daddy' anymore. Usiku takes a few deep breaths, feeling his past-self becoming stronger. But he pushes it back down, regains his composure, and says "It's true, Rose... I love Baba... the love I had for Mama slowly died as the years went by... the only comfort I had was causing serious harm and taking a 'few' lives... at a young age, I was able to do that. I managed to unlock the powers I needed, both physical and magical, to help me in my endeavors. I had it all planned out... not even my sisters could stop me...."

".....Y-Your....sisters?" Rose asks, tears falling.

*Squeak! Squeak! Squeak! Squeak! Squeak! Squeak! Squeak!* Rose looks up to see Usiku's seven bats fly around, and they land on top of the gazebo, staring at Rose while Usiku stares at them with a scrunched up face. Rose runs to the gazebo to get a better look. The bats keep their eyes on her, and Rose notices something. "Wait a minute," Rose says softly, "... Life... Death... Reincarnation... *gasps* Dad... these bats are... oh my god..."

Usiku stands behind Rose, looking at the bats, and he says, "Rose... meet Auntie Aziza..."

*Squeak!*

"Auntie Dara..."

*Squeak!*

"Auntie Marini..."

*Squeak!*

"Auntie Nia..."

*Squeak!*

“Auntie Itanya...”

*Squeak!*

“Your uncle Shandon’s half-sister, Auntie Safiya...”

*Squeak!*

“And... my twin sister... Auntie Zawati...”

*Squeak!*

“Seven sisters....we all share the same father... but we all had different mothers... *They* took me away from Mama and Baba and raised me as their own... as a way to exact revenge on Baba... for taking their lives....”

***Ba-bump ba-bump ba-bump ba-bump!!*** No... Rose thinks to herself. *No... No... They are my aunties? But why did he never tell me!?* “Daddy... why... would you-”

“Because I knew that I would have to explain to you all of this shit,” Usiku reveals, “I *tried* to protect you from knowing this information, but you just couldn’t help but pry...and it’s all because of those damned dreams. I was hoping and praying everyday that those dreams were only for *me* to experience. How was I going to explain to my baby girl that her aunts were killed by her own grandfather because he wanted to have a son? I didn’t even know about this information until they came into my life. How was I going to tell my baby girl that I at one point wanted to follow my father’s footsteps? If you think that what I’m telling you is too much, you haven’t heard the *half* of it, Rose. The things that I did, pumpkin, are unforgivable... ***Do you really want to know who I am? Do you really want to know what I’ve done?***” Usiku’s words thunder through the Garden, making Rose’s heart rumble. Usiku’s body shivers but not to where it’s noticeable. Thoughts race through his mind as he hopes that his daughter will beg not to hear any more of his disturbing past. This isn’t the side of him that he wanted Rose to know existed.

His past was supposed to be a part of him that he would take to his grave and into the Spirit Realm. He didn't want to expose this side of his true nature. Not again. Admitting to Delilah was difficult enough. *Please say no*, Usiku begs within himself, *I'll be okay letting you know about your grandparents and your aunts...but please, no more...*

"...Yes..." Rose answers as she wipes away her tears.

"What?" Usiku says, eyes widen and his heart skips a beat.

Rose turns around to look up at her father with a sorrowful yet serene expression. She says, "I'm your daughter, daddy... just like how you were there for me, I want to be there for you. If you think that I couldn't handle hearing your story as a child or as a teenager, then you were most likely right. I could barely handle mom's from what she's told me thus far... but like I told you in the forest, I'm 18 now... I've had you in my life for *18 years*... and I don't know a thing about you... just like how you had your mom and dad for 10 years...and you didn't know much about them, either. Don't you see? You're leaving me in the dark... just like how they left you..."

"Dammit... Why must you be like your mother...? *sighs*... No. You are not in the dark. You are in the light just like how I want you and Delilah to be. You two don't need to be anywhere near the darkness that I'm in."

"But I want to understand, daddy! I *need* to understand! I feel like my nightmares are making me *HAVE* to understand! If the darkness is who you are, then tell me!"

"Your image of me will change... drastically..."

"Did your image of me change when you learned that I was with *him* three years ago....?"

"***Don't you dare bring him into this.*** That situation was different. You were innocent, and you didn't know any better. My love for you never changed."

“Then I can say the same thing about you. What you have done is in the past. You were a totally different person back then. You have grown since then. So please, just try daddy... pretty please? You can’t be alone in the darkness forever... and I know that your sisters would want you to open up, as well..”

“*Sighs* Pumpkin...” The bats look at their brother and niece, wishing that they could have a say in the matter. They always wanted Rose to know who they were, but Usiku requested that they not say anything since he wanted to be the one to tell Rose everything. They knew that Usiku was bluffing, but they kept their word anyway to keep their little brother’s trust.

Suddenly, “Maaan, if *you* ain’t gon’ tell her, then *I* will,” a new voice jumps in. Rose, Usiku, and the seven aunties look to see a milk chocolate-skinned man with a dark brown medium-sized afro and facial hair walk towards them. He’s a few inches shorter than Usiku, wearing a green button up with gray cargo pants and white and green shoes. His hazel-brown eyes meet Rose’s ruby eyes.

“Uncle Pooh!?” Rose exclaims, surprised to see her uncle again. Shandon hasn’t seen Rose since her graduation, which was back in May.

“Lil’ Honey Bear,” Shandon says to Rose, “You have *no* idea how long I’ve been waiting for your dad to finally stop running away and to just accept that he’s a guilty bastard that’s been given way too many blessings.”

Usiku glares at his half-brother/half-cousin, Shandon, and Shandon glares back with a sinister smirk. Rose notices the tension between the two men, but she doesn’t say anything. “What is it, big bro,” Shandon asks and then he snickers. He gets close to Usiku’s face, to the point that Usiku can smell a faint scent of alcohol and weed in Shandon’s breath, and says, “Are you hating the fact that I’m right for once~?”

“Pooh Bear!” a woman’s smooth voice chimes in, and Rose sees a milk-chocolate skinned woman around the height of her mom, wearing a champagne-brown off shoulder crop top with blue jeggings and tall brown wedges; her hair is in a high bun so that she can show off her golden hoops and necklace.

“Auntie Suga!” Rose runs past her father and uncle to give her aunt, Zeena, a tight hug.

“Oh my Lil’ Honey~!” Zeena says while hugging her only niece, planting kisses on her cheek.

Then, *bark bark!!* Rose looks to see a medium sized, chocolate brown dog with green bows and a diamond studded chain.

“Cocoa!” Rose exclaims, and she kneels down to hug her fur-cousin, letting Cocoa nuzzle her.

Letting Rose and Cocoa reunite, Zeena looks to see her husband and brother-in-law are close to getting into an argument, so she says, “Boys... let’s talk inside... Delilah put too much dedication to these flowers for them to wilt from y'all's bullshit...”



## Chapter 6

Morgana goes through her computer and sorts out different documents. The documents display the increases and decreases in the seven sins' influence on Gaia throughout the eons. She could really care less about which sin was 'winning', but sorting out the documents and having them ready for her boss to look over is one of her many tasks.

Her mind instantly goes back to Kendo, and her hand gains control as it hovers the arrow over a folder filled with pictures of Kendo and her together. She goes through all of the pictures that Kendo took with her phone. She looks at one picture where Kendo is winking and blowing a kiss which makes her giggle softly. She goes to the next picture which is of her doing her work, and the picture makes her blush as she thinks about all of the times Kendo would take candid pictures of her without her knowing. She then gets to a picture of Kendo and her cuddling together naked in Kendo's bed, and Morgana's face immediately heats up. She lets out a sigh and says softly, "Is it bad if I crave for your return, Ken...? I know that you always wanted to live in Gaia, and I want to see you happy...but I want you here with me... Is it so bad to be selfish for even just a second...?"

Suddenly, *gurgle gurgle gurgle gurgle!* Her stomach whimpers as it begs for food. The growling sounds remind Morgana that she has to continue calling Aidoneus' friends. She picks up the office phone and dials up the next friend.

...

The Gluttony District, a place in Umu where everyone is always craving. The seven moons glow a vibrant orange, coloring the district that color. peonis and Upindeonis walk around, either eating fries, a burger, or drinking a milkshake or soda. There's not one peoni that isn't holding any type of food or drink in their hand.

The tour-carriages walk on the dusty road, the newcomer-peonis look at all of the restaurants the district has to offer. “Welcome to the Gluttony District~!” the tour guide exclaims, “Here, you can try whatever delicacy you think of~! Fries, milkshakes, cakes, brownies, burgers, hot dogs, a combo of anything~!! There’s a restaurant catering for every category of food~! However, if you’re on the go and not planning to stay in the district for long, there are plenty of grocery stores~ And if you ever catch the ‘itis’, as humans would call it, you can rest at the luxurious hotels they have, which also offer some good food~! There’s also eating contests you can participate in!” The newcomer-peonis take pictures of the restaurants, and some of them whisper to each other deciding where they are going to eat when they take a break from the tour.

The tour-carriages get to the center of the district, where they find the tallest restaurant tower in the Gluttony District. The establishment glows orange and has a sign that says ‘Hellacious Buffet’ in large, bold letters that spins around for everyone to see. “This is the Hellacious Buffet, home of the Gluttony Quphanto, Alphonse~!” the tour guide explains, “Even though Abigor calls his followers Onis, Alphonse doesn’t really have a name for his people. However, he does give the people in this district the special treatment. If you happen to be a masochist that loves to be called a slob or fatass while being stepped on and poked at, Alphonse is the person that will grant your wish with no hesitation! Otherwise, it’s best if you don’t come to the buffet if you’re sensitive to that kind of treatment since that’s where Alphonse spends most of his time.”

Inside the Hellacious Buffet, peonis take an elevator to the top level. The buffet is well lit, over-saturating the colors of the food that is being served. Televisions can be found everywhere, so there’s no way to miss anything; they mostly show either important news, award shows, or entertaining events. There are conveyors that zig zag in the center of the place with food waiting for someone to grab them. The belt starts from the kitchen, and whatever food isn’t taken from

the conveyor is taken back to the kitchen where five chef peonis will serve the food on a huge platter(they all have to carry the heavy platter) and take it to Alphonse, the extremely tall pale man that has warthog ears and legs and long, straight, orange hair who lays on a hammock in his own VIP section. Only his pet warthog, Prosciutto, and he can reside on this side of the buffet.

Alphonse's fuzzy, brown warthog ears twitch in excitement as he watches his next serving approach him. The chefs lay down the silver platter, and Alphonse's mouth waters looking at the cheesy potatoes, barbecue drenched chicken, fudgy brownies, lemon pound cakes, and buttery croissants. His pet squeals in happiness as it goes for a brownie while the hungry Quphanto grabs a piece of cake and starts eating. *Nom nom nom nom!! Gulp!!* "Aaah~ It's so good to be back here~! Ohohohohoho~!" Alphonse says in a sing-y tune. He lays back on the hammock and crosses his furry brown warthog legs as he looks at the ceiling. He continues eating his food, until *dingalingalingaling! Dingalingalingaling!* Alphonse's bronze rotary telephone rings throughout the place, even though it's filled with the noise from the peonis eating and chatting. Alphonse picks up the phone with his greasy hands and mouth full of chewed up food. "Helloooo~!" Alphonse muffles.

*"Master Alphonse? This is Morgana."*

*"Oooh~! Morgana, how's life~?" Nom nom nom!*

*"I'm doing okay. Lord Aidoneus wants you to know that he'll be holding an important meeting soon."*

"What~? Aidoneus wants us all to come together, aye? He must want to hear what happened from my point of view~!"

*"Um... sure, Master Alphonse. But the main reason why Lord Aidoneus is holding this meeting is because he's holding an event at the Colosseum."*

“What!?! The Colosseum!? Well why didn’t you say so~! Ohohohohoho~! Please tell me that there will be food as soon as I get there~.”

“.....*Yes sir.*”

“Perfect~! Tell Aidoneus that I’m on my way!”

“*Very well. We’ll see you soon, Master.*”

*Clang!* Aidoneus hangs up the phone, and pets his warthog, and says, “Did you hear that, Prosciutto~? We’re going to have some more fun~! OHOHOHOHOHOHO~!!” Then he looks at his followers and says, “HEY, YOU WALKING TUBS OF LARD! I’LL BE GONE FOR A WHILE! CONTINUE ENJOYING YOUR ENDLESS AMOUNTS OF MOUTH-GASMS UNTIL I COME BACK, YOU FAT, WORTHLESS, PIECES OF SHIT! OHOHOHOHOHOHOHO~!!” Everyone in the room laughs along with him and gives him a round of applause as he makes his way to the exit, holding his pet, Prosciutto.

## Chapter 7

July 2017

Last Night

Alexander and Thomas walk towards the howling cave. Thomas takes a deep breath, looks at Alexander and asks, “Okay, Alex... do you remember how to cleanse an area?”

“Hmm... a little... but I think you should do this in case I mess up,” Alexander says, his mind somewhere else.

“Hehe, fair enough. And when I get done with this, we’ll go back to your apartment, and I’ll whip up something to cleanse you,” Thomas says, softly smiling. He walks inside the cave, enters the Spirit Realm, and stands firmly in front of the portal that leads to Umu. He clasps his hands together and mumbles a prayer in his spiritual language. As he prays, his hands glow a bright turquoise, and after a few seconds, he releases his hands, letting turquoise sparkles fall endlessly into the portal. He keeps praying, and immediately the entire portal goes from the murky rainbow colors to nothing but shades of bright turquoise and white.

As Thomas is cleansing the cave, Alexander looks up at the starless sky. He thinks about the conversation that he had with Kendo earlier. *Has Usiku really hidden that much from Rose?*

Alexander ponders, *I know he’s been through a lot, but... if he’s really hidden who his family is... then Rose rarely knows anything about herself. God... did Delilah do the same thing?*

“Alex!” Alexander jumps at Thomas’ voice, and he sees his twin walk out of the cave. “Are you ready to head back home?”

“Yeah... of course,” Alexander replies, still out of place.

...

Present

Mid-Morning

Amethyst opens the window blinds, inviting the sun’s warm rays, and she lays down on her green yoga mat to start her morning exercise. She puts her long, black, and shiny hair in a

ponytail, and she immediately begins to do her stretches. As she warms up for her yoga and meditation, Alexander sleeps on the white couch.

Thomas is in the kitchen, boiling some water that is being mixed with honey, lemon juice, spearmint, and raspberry juice. Thomas looks around the kitchen and takes a glance at the living room, noticing how it has changed since the last time he was here, which was not long ago. Despite Pierre damaging some of the furniture when he attacked Alexander, the furniture was immediately replaced with new ones thanks to Amethyst paying it all off with her savings. The calm Upendelaiki grabs a spoonful of sugar and puts it into the mixture and stirs it altogether. He then goes through his pocket, and grabs a white pouch filled with what looks like pomegranate seeds, except these seeds are red and purple and have an iridescent sparkle to them. He grabs a pinch full of the seeds and puts them in the small pot. He prays over the mixture, and suddenly the concoction glows. “Okay,” Thomas says softly, “This should do the trick.” He turns off the heat, and goes to one of the cupboards to grab a large cup. He carefully pours the hot red-orange-yellow iridescent liquid into the cup. “I should wake him up,” he says, and he walks to the living room quietly, not wanting to interrupt Amethyst’s yoga. He sits next to sleeping Alexander and shakes him gently.

“H-Huh...?” Alexander groans, rubbing the sleepy-seeds out of his eyes and wiping away the drool from his mouth.

“I made the potion. You have to drink the entire thing in order for it to completely cleanse you,” Thomas explains.

“Are you sure it’ll work, Thomas? I mean I’ve never heard of a Malaiki or peoni fully recovering from being tainted,” Alexander asks, scratching his head.

“Because you haven’t been tainted for a long time, you still have a chance to get rid of the effects it’s had upon you,” Thomas explains.

Amethyst listens into the conversation between the Upendelaiki twins, and as she’s in a tree pose, she asks, “How exactly does tainting and cleansing work?”

“It’s... quite complicated,” Thomas laughs nervously, “See, when you are tainted, it could mean that you’ve changed in either appearance, mentality, or sometimes both. This happens when you partake into an activity or consume things that are the polar opposite of your nature. For example, Alex... Alphonse forced him to drink his apple juice that also had Umu maggots, therefore changing his appearance since Alex is of Maza. Thank god it was *only* his appearance, otherwise we wouldn’t be here right now if his mentality was messed with. Alphonse tried to pull a fast one on me while having me trapped, but I didn’t let him win so easily. The only way for an Upendelaiki to be cleansed is basically how they were tainted but it’s with something of their nature. So for Alexander, he has to drink something that is of Maza.”

“So you’re basically canceling out what happened to Alex,” Amethyst gathers.

“Precisely! And luckily, I had some pomegranate seeds from back home,” Thomas says, smiling cheerfully.

“Hmmm...what if Alexander were to have not been cleansed by now...?” Amethyst asks.

“Then it would have taken much more effort to cleanse him. However, there are cases where a Mazan or Umuite has been tainted for so long that the effects are permanent. In other words, it’s possible for a Malaiki to become a peoni, and it’s possible for a peoni to become a Malaiki, whether they look the part or not.” Thomas further explains.

“Oh...”

“Yeah, don’t think about it too much. Like I’ve said many times, the Spirit Realm along with Maza and Umu are so complicated and hazy. Let’s just settle with the fact that I’m able to cleanse Alex, okay?”

“Okay. Hmhm, I’m perfectly fine with that.”

“Okay, so can I have the drink now?” Alexander grumbles, “This tainting and cleansing talk is making my head pound.”

“No offense, Alex, but you have legs,” Thomas retorts, laughing a little.

Alexander mumbles under his breath as he stumbles towards the kitchen to drink Thomas’ mixture. He lifts the cup to his lips to test the temperature, acknowledging that the drink is warm. He takes a few sips, chewing on whatever pomegranate seeds he catches, his long, pale ears twitching out of excitement from the sweet and sour taste. He downs the entire drink, not giving his body a minute to process what’s happening, and walks back to the living room and immediately says, “Thomas, we need to send Kendo back to Umu.”

Thomas’ eyes widen, and he says, “Whoa whoa, where is this coming from?”

“No, you need to listen to me,” Alexander snaps, not wanting to waste any more time, “Ever since we met Kendo, we’ve seen that he’s been nothing but trouble.”

Thomas stands up and gestures his hands to try to tell his older twin to calm down. “Look, I understand that he may have said some things last night that has raised some concerns, but-”

“No, you didn’t hear what *I* heard!!” Alexander’s exclamation of frustration startles Amethyst, and she stops what she’s doing to look at her lover. “When Kendo took me to the cave while you were dealing with Pierre, he literally went on and on how he enjoys being in Gaia-”

“Okay, well that sounds natural to me-”



“*Causing chaos!* He *wants* trouble! If there’s no sense of drama or confusion going on, he’ll be sure to make it happen! He admitted all of that to me!”

“Well, of course he’s going to want to cause mayhem. He’s half-Upindeoni. Plus, he’s been in Umu his entire life.”

“So shouldn’t we be sending him back!?”

“...Alex... there are some humans here who were possibly peonis once... and you don’t see me damning them... they deserve a chance to change, and that includes Kendo. That poor soul has been under Aidoneus’ control, and as Upendelaikis, we’re supposed to help him. Sending him back to his father is only going to worsen his condition. We don’t specifically know what he’s been through, but whatever it is he experienced in Umu, it’s terrible enough to make him constantly want to escape.”

“Thomas...”

“Also, Kendo may be half-Upindeoni, but he’s also half-human. Because he’s half-human, he’s not supposed to be in Umu, anyways. It’s one of the Spiritual Laws.”

“.....”

“He may be meant to bring chaos, but he should be given the chance to experience what it’s like to do some good, too. If it’ll make you feel better, I have to go back to Maza to discuss this with the High Order. If none of us knew that Aidoneus had a son, then I know 100% that no one in Maza knows of this, either.”

Thomas walks to the door, ready to leave, but Alexander stops him by saying, “What are they going to do about this!? They literally allowed Aidoneus to take  $\frac{2}{3}$  of Maza’s people! You really think they’re going to give a damn about him having a son!?”

Thomas looks back at Alexander with a determined face and says, “Alex, I’m afraid to say that Aidoneus didn’t break any of the Spiritual Laws by convincing many of the Malaikis to come with him to Umu, and it was because he still had his Upendelaiki appearance at the time, so he still had access to Maza. That was simply him *tainting* them, and now they’re all peonis and Upindeonis. However, again, because Aidoneus’ son is half-human and is within a realm that is strongly connected to the Spirit Realm, which is against one of the Spiritual Laws, they will most likely grant Kendo’s freedom, and Aidoneus won’t be able to do anything about that. At that point, *you* can play your Upendelaiki role and perhaps be a good influence to him.”

Alexander looks away in dismay, but Thomas reassures him, “Don’t worry. Please rest, Alex. You’ve been cleansed, Amy is safe, Kendo is free until further notice, and the peonis have gone quiet. Enjoy the peace, today. Oh! And do check on Rose and Usiku. Let me know how they are doing as well when I get back. See you later.” And without another word, Thomas quietly leaves the apartment, leaving Alexander and Amethyst alone.

Amethyst walks up to her lover and hugs him, her heart pitter patters from the overload of happiness she’s experiencing, knowing that she’s got her Alexander back. Alexander’s heart skips a beat from the random love attack, but he returns the affection by hugging her back and kissing her forehead. Amethyst looks up to Alexander, and notices that he’s still the pale, white-haired, and yellow eyed Upendelaiki that she was initially afraid of. “Hmm, I wonder when Thomas’ cure is supposed to kick in?” she asks, tilting her head and twitching her nose in curiosity.

Suddenly, *gurgle gurgle gurgle gurgle gurgle!!* Waves of pain and nausea take over, and Alexander immediately clutches his stomach and groans loudly. “A-Alex!” Amethyst exclaims. Alexander sprints to the nearest bathroom, still groaning out of pain. Nothing but the sounds of

Alexander's agony fills the apartment. Not wanting to disturb him or potentially embarrass him, Amethyst turns on the television to watch whatever is on, which is a cooking show, and turns up the volume. *Okay... I guess that answers my question*, Amethyst confirms.

A few minutes pass, and Alexander limps out of the bathroom, spraying a can of Breezy Breeze, its flowery scent taking over the living room. Amethyst looks at Alexander, and tilts her head as she notices her lover has his fair skin again along with his chocolate brown hair and deep ocean blue eyes with round pupils. "Oh!" she exclaims, "Well that was fast!"

"I guess Thomas didn't want to tell me that his little elixir was a laxative!!!" Alexander screams, whimpering right after, "My poor butt!!! And then I saw the little maggots!!!"

"Okay, too much info, dear..." Amethyst cringes.

"But my butt, Amy... my poor butt," Alexander whines.

"*Sighs* Come on, let's drink some water together. Afterwards, we'll go see how Rose is doing," Amethyst plans out loud. "That poor girl... I hope she's okay."

"That poor girl?... My poor booty..." Alexander whimpers.

**Chapter 8**  
**July 2017**  
**Late Morning**

Zeena, Delilah, and Rose sit on the couch catching each other up with what's been going on with their lives while Shandon and Usiku talk in the kitchen, and Cocoa lays down next to Zeena and relaxes. While Zeena was just chilling with her husband and fur-daughter back in Crescent City, Louisiana, Delilah and Rose were going through the craze-filled events involving Amethyst and the others. Though Zeena's heart aches from knowing that she wasn't around to give some sort of help, she's glad that her niece is okay. "So, that's what's been goin' on..." Zeena says softly, "Are ya' friends okay, now? You should check on them if you haven't..."

"They're fine, auntie," Rose says, "I just have to get these answers from daddy..." Rose answers, lookin at her trembling hands.

"Rose..." Delilah softly says, worry splattered on her face, her heart pounding from the fact that Usiku is finally opening up to their daughter.

"Hmm..." Zeena hums out, looking at the kitchen entrance, sensing some tense energy arising. "I'm gonna go check on them..." she then says, as she gets up and walks to the kitchen. Cocoa notices her mama walking away, but she decides to stay with Rose and Delilah.

"Mom, be honest with me," Rose says as she now looks at Delilah, "Did dad tell you everything about himself to you when you two met each other?"

"Um... not... everything..." Delilah admits, looking down, "He actually didn't tell me anything about his family until at least a year and some change into our relationship."

"That's when he let you meet them, right?" Rose asks.

"...I haven't met them, honey," Delilah confesses.

"...You're kidding."

"I wish I was... and to be fair, he hasn't met my folks, either..."

“What the- Why not!?”

“Sweetie, trust me, you *do not ever* want to meet our families....that’s why we moved here... and never told you about them. We wanted to start over together...”

“But couldn’t you at least give me a more specific reason why you wanted to keep me away from our family...?”

“*Because they’re both shitty, okay?!*” Delilah whispers her yells, not wanting to draw attention and disturb Cocoa, “*My mom was a bitch who didn’t give a fuck about me!*”

“*But you mentioned you had brothers!*” Rose whispers her yells back, interrupting her mother, “*You didn’t even want to see **them!**!*”

“...sighs They didn’t make things better...” Delilah says softly, “I’m being serious, Rose, when I say that out of everyone in my family, I would have let you meet *my* dad....but he’s not here...”

“Mom... if I told you that I wanted to meet your family and dad’s, despite your wishes... would you allow me to do so?”

“No!! Are you crazy!?”

“Well you two aren’t giving me a choice!! You’ve had all this time to tell me about my family, who I am basically, and you never did it!! You two *still* don’t want to tell me anything!! What, did you guys think that I *wouldn’t* grow curious the longer that I didn’t know anything!?”

*Whimper. Whine.* Cocoa gets up from the arguing and creates distance from Rose and Delilah.

“I got you, Lil’ Honey!!” Shandon immediately marches out the kitchen with a cup full of cognac.

“Uncle, where did you get that!?” Rose asks as her eyes widen.

“I brought some over, now anyways!!” Shandon takes a sip, his face scrunching up from the intensity of the spirit taking over. “Rosey? Out of everyone in this muhfucka-”

“*Shandon...!*” Zeena tries to interrupt. Usiku comes out of the kitchen as well, trying to control himself, Rose’s bat-aunts sit in different places of the living room, staying quiet, and Cocoa, now seeing her dad under the possession of the alcohol, runs behind one of the couches, softly whimpering.

Shandon continues, “*I* happen to have *the best* Mama and Pops! Pops kept it real with me. How Uncle Mwezi, aka yo’ granddaddy, was always up to some shit. Held these events where people would try to fight him for whatever reason only to end up *dead*. And guess what? Yo’ granddaddy wanted Usiku to be the same way! However, like Usiku said, our sisters took him away and raised him in the wilderness, but clearly that didn’t do shit.”

*HISSS!!!* The bats hiss out their arguments, wishing that they were in Spirit Realm or Dream Realm so that everyone can understand what they are saying, but unfortunately, only Usiku knows what they’re saying. Rose watches her uncle in disbelief as he walks around the living room, waving his arms around trying to create a picture of what happened in the past. The name ‘Mwezi’ makes Rose’s heart drop to her stomach as she remembers hearing that name in her nightmares. Shandon continues, “And then get this, he ran into some dude one day, I don’t know who it was, but it was sometime in 1991.”

“Kendo! He...He told me how he met dad before... and he had dad fight Cerberus...” Rose confirms, her heart pounding, making her stomach and intestines vibrate.

Shandon snickers a little and says, “I dunno who this Kendo fella is, but yeah! *He’s* the one that led Usiku to my family’s place, where my Mama and Pops took him in, though he wasn’t

there all of the time *and we all know why*. You wanna know what he was doing while he was up in Crescent City, Louisiana, in 1991?”

“***Shandon...***” Usiku growls.

Shandon refuses to stop, “He and I were a part of a gang, and his role in the gang was to kill muhfuckas who didn’t pay up in time! And get this... he actually *enjoyed* it!! That’s ‘cuz he was already killing folks before he even joined the gang!!”

***Ba-bump....Ba-bump... Ba-bump... Gang?*** Rose thinks to herself.

“Now me? I was tired. I actually didn’t want to be part of the gang anymore, but I knew that I couldn’t get out of there alive. I was trapped. I had no choice but to stay, but luckily...I had friends in that gang. I thought that by having them be with me, I’d be alright...because I knew I wasn’t alone. But everything changed when Usiku killed them...all because he got into it with our leader...he killed them all except me and another friend who, THANK GOD, wasn’t there when it happened. I was devastated...I had to witness all of that shit go down... but I tried to look at the positive... I thought that by Usiku doing this, he would stop killin’ folks entirely. But nope! This douche wasn’t satisfied. He was *still* killin’ folks out here, and no one knew who was doing it!”

***Ba-bump..Ba-bump.. Ba-bump... Daddy... was really a serial killer...?***

“But then Pops had a vision... a sign. Someone, a woman, would be able to finally motivate Usiku to stop with her *‘unconditional love’*. That woman happened to be yo’ mama. But you know what!? My Pops was so wrong! You wanna know why!?”

“Shandon, stop it!!” Delilah yells, “That’s enough!! She gets it!! Usiku was not always a good guy!! Stop trying to-”

“Point out reasons why her doubts are valid? Hell nah... I’m not done,” Shandon glares at Delilah. He looks back at Rose and continues, “Lil’ Honey, Delilah and Usiku met up in Malaiki City, California in 1996. Yo mama had an abusive ex on the loose. Now put yo’self in ya’ mom’s shoes. What would you have done if you knew yo’ abusive ex was on the hunt for you?”

*An abusive ex?* Rose’s breath becomes unsteady, but she speaks up and says, “I would have gotten the police involved...”

“And I did that, Shandon!” Delilah yells, “The day that he put me in that coma, Zeena got the cops to arrest him! And when I woke up 8 months later, I had gotten a restraining order!”

*A coma...?*

“Only for him to still come for you,” Usiku admits, and everyone looks at him, Shandon smirking, showing his gapped teeth. Usiku continues, “Someone bailed him out...and his mission was to get you back...”

“Yep,” Shandon confirms, “And instead of getting the cops involved, again, what did you do instead, Usiku...?”

“...”

“Go ahead, Lil’ Honey, ask yo’ daddy what he do!” Shandon looks at Rose, pointing at Usiku.

“...”

***Ba-bump. Ba-bump. Ba-bump. Ba-bump.*** “Daddy...w-what did you do to him...?” Rose whimpers.

“...”

“We can’t hear you, dickhead!! What did you do!?” Shandon yells.

“I killed him!!” Usiku confirms, and Rose’s heart drops. “I...I killed Delilah’s ex...and I took Delilah here...”



Rose feels her eyes about to water, but she looks at her mom in desperation and says,  
“But....Wait....Mom... you-”

“Decided to be with Usiku after *witnessing* your ex’s murder,” Shandon says while still smirking.

*But why...?*

“Yes, and I was upset about it!!” Delilah gets off the couch and walks towards Shandon. “I was going to end everything with Usiku after I saw what he did to Frankie and learned who he really was before meeting me, but Usiku promised me he would never kill again!! And he hasn’t since then!! Usiku was a victim to evil! He didn’t know any better!!”

“Usiku was a grown ass man doing grown ass people activities. He knew what he was doing,” Shandon retorts, his smirk now being replaced with a sneer, “Plus, what we not ‘bout to do is ignore the fact that he did try to kill a certain someone three years ago, but we ain’t gonna get into that... not today.”

*HUH!? What does he mean by that!?* Rose’s head and heart begins racing.

Delilah yells, “Why the fuck are you trying to have my daughter go against him!?”

“I’m not tryna’ have Lil’ Honey take sides. I’m just tellin’ her who her daddy was in the past so she can have a better understanding as to why he’s so distant,” Shandon says, as he takes another sip. “Woo!! Now sit down, Honey Bear, you’re interruptin’ my story tellin’.”

“Pooh Bear,” Zeena walks up to her husband, resting her hands on his shoulder, “This is *Usiku’s* role. Let the man tell *his* daughter *his* story *himself*. That’s what we agreed on years ago, remember?”

“And that day never came, Suga!” Shandon exclaims, “This girl over here is literally a princess stuck in a very tall castle, not having any idea as to what goes on in the outside world *while also* not knowing the people who put her here in the first place!”

“Well she knows now, baby. There’s nothing else to tell... now let Usiku and Delilah take care of it,” Zeena says firmly.

“Nah!! I ain’t done yet!! Rose-”

“Enough!” Usiku raises his voice, “You’re drunk... Zeena, you and him need to leave...**now**. Take the dog with you....”

Cocoa whimpers and whines and comes from behind the couch only to walk upstairs and into Rose’s bedroom since her door was partially open. “Cocoa!” Zeena notices her fur-daughter running away from the chaos, not wanting the loud noise to bring back any more bad memories of her past. Zeena immediately follows Cocoa’s steps, and gently approaches her, seeing how Cocoa shakes and trembles like a delicate tree branch trying to fight against a monstrous breeze. Zeena manages to get close to Cocoa, and she hugs her tightly, whispering words of reassurance.

Meanwhile, Shandon gets the chance to get away from his brother and he sits next to his niece, wrapping his arm around her, holding her close. He speaks in a low tone, “***Lil’ Honey, you wanna know something? I was shocked by yo’ daddy letting me live when he killed the gang... because he even tried to kill me on multiple occasions...***”

“H-Huh!?” Rose exclaims, her heart sinking lower and lower as if it was an anchor falling down into the deepest parts of the ocean.

“Yep! Yo’ daddy enjoyed his killing oh so much, that he would even kill his own flesh,” Shandon explains, keeping eye contact as if he’s trying to talk to Rose’s soul.

Rose sits there in silence trying to gather all that Shandon is spilling out, but the fact that Usiku attempted to kill Shandon at one point is what boggles her mind once more. However, her soul gives her the strength to break free from Shandon's embrace, gets up from her seat and yells, "NO! NOW YOU'RE LYING TO ME!"

"OH?" Shandon gets up along with her, his heart racing to its own fast pace.

"I CAN BELIEVE THAT DADDY WAS ONCE A SERIAL KILLER GIVING THE FACT THAT HIS FAMILY THRIVED OFF OF THAT, BUT I WILL ABSOLUTELY NOT BELIEVE THAT DADDY WOULD TRY TO KILL YOU, HIS OWN BROTHER!"

"...Heh...Hehehehehehehehe..." Shandon snickers as he listens to his niece, a broken smirk forming.

"I'M SERIOUS, UNCLE!! WHY ARE YOU LAUGHING?" Rose's screams only disturbs Cocoa once more, and Zeena immediately leads Cocoa to outside, whispering to her baby as they leave.

***"Because you're really tryna paint yo' daddy like he was some killer with a moral compass,"*** Shandon sneers out as his smile widens.

"WELL CLEARLY HE HAD ONE GIVING THE FACT THAT HE KILLED SOMEONE THAT HURT MOMMA ON TOP OF TRYING TO PROTECT ME THREE YEARS AGO!! And no, we're not going to gloss over that. There's a reason why you mentioned that event...I didn't know that daddy was trying to kill *him*... and although it hurts a little knowing that now, I understand why he attempted to...although my 15 year old self would probably be livid..."

***"No matter what his reasons were...a murderer is a murderer, Rose. Yo' daddy wanted to tap into his old ways and kill the guy, but of course, yo' mama didn't want him to cause any***

*more problems since they knew the dude's mom. So she stopped him, and they took care of the son of a bitch the other way."*

"..."

*"So yeah... who knows where he at now, and I don't care as long as he is nowhere near you."*

"..."

*"I'm telling you, befo' Delilah came into his life, ANYONE and EVERYONE was Usiku's target...includin' ME. Just had to give him a reason to go off...and then bam... You're history... no one could stop him..."*

"No.....No I still don't believe you!"

"You don't believe me."

"No!! You're family!! He'd never hurt you!!"

"..."

Rose's heart slowly lifts up. She feels like she's done it. She shut her uncle down. Whatever else that needs to be discussed will be between her, Usiku, and Delilah. She looks at her mama, and Delilah hugs her tightly in the intense silence. Delilah plants a kiss on Rose's forehead.

*"I'm so sorry, baby,"* Delilah whispers to Rose, tears rolling down her face. A knot forms in Rose's throat, but she nuzzles her mom to let her know that it's okay. Usiku watches his two sources of light together, and even though Shandon has done a lot of damage to their 'patching things up' phase, today can still be salvaged.

*"...It makes sense now,"* Shandon finally says, making the women and Usiku look at him in a mixture of confusion and demise. The drunk Quphanto/Upendelaiki hybrid glares at Usiku and growls, *"...It makes sense why you kept me and Zeena away from her, Usiku... Now I see why*

*you took Delilah away from Malaiki City without saying anything to us. You knew this shit would happen, you fucking son of a bitch...*” Shandon and Usiku scowl at each other. *“You had this girl homeschooled...you chose to stay home with her at all times...you made sure that if anything bad happens, you had someone else do the dirty work, like having her friends take care of Cerberus...all just so that if I were to tell her what really happened...she wouldn’t believe a single word coming out of my mouth...She would believe no one...but her precious ol’ daddy...”*

Usiku keeps his mouth shut in hopes that Shandon will just walk away. Rose’s heart begins pounding again, listening to Shandon’s words. Delilah musters up enough might to say to her brother-in-law, “Would you just leave already!? You’ve already fucked up enough!! Usiku was in the middle of telling Rose everything, but you just came in to mess it all up!!”

*“That’s because I know this jungle fiend was going to leave out a few details...I just had a feeling...a hunch...”* Shandon growls out.

“I don’t give a fuck what you thought,” Delilah snaps back, “Hate Usiku all you want, but you’re NOT about to rob away his time with his daughter like this! *Get out!!*”

*“.... You don’t believe me, Lil’ Honey?”* Shandon looks to Rose for her answer.

Rose whimpers out, “I...I-I’m hearing what you’re telling me, Uncle...I had to hear from you, from Cerberus, and from Kendo...B-But I want to hear it all come from daddy. I want *him* to confirm it all to me. I want to hear his life story from his mouth and his mouth only...”

*“Confirmation....Hehe, confirmation...Evidence...Confession....Things that Usiku made sure weren't present during his killing days...”*

“Uncle Pooh, please. I-I know you’re just trying to h-help me, but please go home with auntie and Cocoa, okay?”

*“You want your confirmation? You want proof that he’d kill lil’ ol’ me even after all of these years? Oh, I’ll give you proof. IMMA GIVE YOU YO’ PROOF!!”*

Suddenly, in slow motion, Shandon whips out his silver gun and points at Usiku, and as soon as Rose sees the gun staring dead at her father, her heart plummets. Usiku lunges towards Shandon, then suddenly, *BAM!!* The sound startles the ladies, making them scream and get onto the ground, holding each other. The bullet pierces into Usiku’s left shoulder, but ignoring the slight pain, Usiku manages to put his body weight onto his brother and forces him on the ground, slamming onto the living room table. *CRASH!!* Usiku manages to snatch Shandon’s gun and tosses it to where it’s out of Shandon’s reach, and he presses his hands against Shandon’s wrists, looking into the enraged and influenced Shandon’s eyes, seeing his soul flaring up like a fire that’s been fed more gasoline. Shandon wastes no time, and he spits in Usiku’s eye, making the half Quphanto grunt from disgust and pain. He covers his eye with one of his hands, freeing Shandon, allowing Shandon to punch Usiku off of him, and he gets up to grab his gun. However, one of the bats grabs his weapon. Usiku wipes the saliva off of his face and eye, provoked by the revolting action. Shandon tries to get his gun back, and Usiku takes this moment to walk towards Shandon and grabs him by his shirt, and headbutts him. *BOOM!!* The headbutt dazes Shandon, and Usiku takes this opportunity to punch him in his face, which makes Shandon spin around like a cartoon character. Usiku then kicks Shandon to the ground, destroying more of the furniture. However, Shandon gets right back up, trying to regain his balance. Delilah screams and pleads for the two brothers to stop fighting, but her begging is muffled from Usiku’s apparent frustration and Shandon’s unstoppable determination. Shandon lunges at Usiku, attacking him with a fury of punches and kicks, some landing on Usiku’s body, but Usiku, although feeling the intense impact of the attacks, doesn’t budge or lose balance. Usiku takes the

opportunity to attack back, throwing powerful punches and kicks. Shandon dodges his brother's attacks, but Usiku lands a punch to Shandon's stomach. *POW!* Shandon spits out blood, and Usiku shoves Shandon down to the ground once more. Usiku wastes no time and starts punching Shandon's face in.

"USIKU!! STOP PLEASE!!" Delilah screams, running towards her soulmate and trying to pull him off of Shandon. However, Usiku, blinded by his wrath, accidentally hits his lover with his elbow, cutting her cheek. She squeals from the impact, and Usiku snaps his body to see Delilah on the ground holding her face, his heart descending.

"*Gasps* Delilah!!" Usiku yells as he gets off of Shandon and runs towards Delilah. Delilah cries and wails from the pain, but Usiku tries to check on her by holding her and trying to see the cut. Delilah struggles to get away from Usiku, but he doesn't budge. "Baby stop! Let me see where I hurt you!" Usiku pleads.

"LET GO OF ME, USIKU!!" Delilah wails out.

Hurt by her words, Usiku lets go of her and gets up. "Baby, I'm sorry," Usiku says, "Let me help you get up at leas-"

"WHY DIDN'T YOU STOP!?!?" Delilah cries as she gets up, showing Usiku her puffy, red eyes letting a waterfall of tears rush out. The tears merge with the blood that leaks out of her cut.

"Baby, I-" Usiku is stopped by Delilah's intensified cries as she storms upstairs, trying to attend to herself. Usiku watches his lover disappear, and then he looks at his daughter with bloodied fists and his blood-red eyes having that same red glow she saw earlier making a comeback.

Rose looks at her father, the man that was trying to end the madness but was becoming a monster, and her uncle, the man that tried to prove a point by making it look like he was going to

kill him. Not saying anything, Rose, still in her prom dress, runs out of the house. *SLAM!* As soon as she closes the door out of desolation and rage, she runs from the porch, releasing her tears. Where she is going, even she doesn't know, just as long as it's nowhere near her home. Zeena and Cocoa, sitting in Shandon's brown Caddy, notice Rose running. "Where the hell is she going!?" Zeena softly exclaims, trying not to scare Cocoa. "Cocoa, stay right here, okay, baby?" Zeena gets out of the car, and tries to yell out for Rose. "Rose!? Rose!! What are you doing, get back here!?" However, Rose keeps running, getting closer to the forest, until she sees a white van pulling up.

The van stops abruptly, and Amethyst comes out of the vehicle, her face showing worry. She exclaims, "Oh my god, Rose! Sweet heart, are you okay!?" Rose runs right into Amethyst's arms, and the tall woman hugs her tightly. Rose's cries become uncontrollable as she doesn't care that her tears and snot are ruining Amethyst's shirt.

"JUST TAKE ME AWAY FROM HERE!! PLEASE!!" Rose wails out.

"But... *sighs* Of course, dear... Come on," Amethyst says, as she helps Rose get into the back of the van. Amethyst gets in the passenger seat, and she talks to Alexander, "Alex, turn this thing around."

"Huh!? W-What happened!?" Alexander asks, then he looks at the distraught woman. "Rose...?" Alexander examines Rose, looking at her like she's a princess whose heart has been crushed by her own knight in shining armor. She buries her face from sorrow, wrath, and embarrassment. Amethyst snaps to get Alexander's attention.

"We need to take her to her friends... Drive us to Tenacity's place. We'll gather everyone there," Amethyst orders. Alexander doesn't say anything, so he just nods, and he hurries away from Rose's home.



Meanwhile, Usiku looks at the door that Rose stormed out of. Nothing but intense silence fills the room. Shandon gets up, groaning from the beatdown he just received, and he looks at Usiku with a bloody smirk, bruises and cuts covering up most of his body and face. He taunts Usiku, “Come on, brother!! We ain’t done yet, and you know it!! You *really* wanna kill me now, huh?” Usiku’s killer instinct takes initiative, and he storms towards Shandon, but the bat-sisters fly in between their siblings. *Squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak!!!* Some of the bats plead Usiku not to do any more while the other bats hiss and demand Shandon to stop the instigating.

Zeena storms back into the house and walks up to Shandon. Seeing Zeena, the bats fly out of the way and land in another part of the damaged room. Not caring about the state that he’s in, *SLAP!* Zeena’s hand flies across Shandon’s face, leaving a hot, numbing feeling on his cheek along with the piercing sensation coming from the cuts and bruises. “Are you fucking happy, now...?” Zeena growls out softly. “That girl done ran up out of here and got a ride to God knows where. You happy you got your sweet victory...?”

“Hell yeah, I’m happy,” Shandon looks at Zeena with a straight face. He looks at Usiku and walks up to him and says, “I finally got to see this bitch’s downfall. Never thought I’d see the day. I ain’t gonna lie, Usiku... I was pissed at how much you were getting away with. All of those deaths, and yet you still got to roam free. You was even able to have your own fucking family. For over 20 years, Usiku, I was over here PRAYING for something to just fuck you up somehow. I couldn’t stop you after you killed the gang... I *thought* that I could whoop yo’ ass the day I found out you were *still* killing... and then after you defeated me, I hoped that you would *at least* respect my wishes after seeing how much I improved. But nah you said ‘fuck that.’ So I prayed...and I prayed...**and I prayed**...hoping that one day, karma would just come around and bite you where it hurts the most. I see that my prayer has finally been answered...and

that answer was *me* all along... Who'd have thought it'd have gone down like this! If it weren't for Delilah jumping in, you'd have finished my ass, ***and your daughter would have witnessed it all!?!***"

Zeena's face scrunches up even more and she says, "THE FUCK YOU MEAN DELILAH JUMPED IN? WHERE SHE AT NOW!?" Zeena storms upstairs, going to check on her best friend.

Shandon, seeing that he and Usiku are the only ones in the room now besides the bats, presses his face against Usiku's, his hazel-brown eyes digging into Usiku's bloody-red eyes. Shandon snarls, "***You thought you could get away with all that you've done... all because we're descendents of Ubokufa... You thought that you could go get the woman of your dreams and a child after the shit that you pulled off and not pay for the consequences? While I had to struggle and survive my entire life because of OTHER people's decisions? Nah muhfucka. If the justice system wasn't gonna get yo' ass, karma most certainly would, and I'm glad she did today. I never trusted you... Zeena had always been iffy about you... Delilah is just too damn nice to you... and now Rose, the one that loved you the most, can't even stand seeing your face.***"

"...***Get... out...***" Usiku growls.

"Or what, bitch? You gonna finally kill me? No one's here to witness it now," Shandon snaps back. "Lemme guess...***you made your lil' fingerprints disappear too, didn't ya? Ya know...the most vital piece of evidence?***"

"SHANDON, LET'S GO!" Zeena yells, wiping away her tears of frustration as she stomps down the stairs. "You've done enough damage for today!" She opens the door, and walks out, not saying another word.

Shandon walks away from Usiku, and before Shandon follows his wife, he looks at Usiku and says, "Have a blessed day." And he leaves the house and closes the door gently. Usiku looks at the door, fighting the urge to open it back and finish the job. His heart beats wildly, and he tries to take deep breaths to calm down. He finally notices that his fists have been balled up, and he releases them. He looks at his palms, watching his handprint and fingerprint reappear onto his hands, the one ability that he always used whenever he wanted to take someone's life and not leave anything that traces back to him. He lets out a sigh and hangs his head low, knowing that Shandon's plan, for the most part, worked, and if it weren't for Delilah jumping in... Usiku would have indeed killed Shandon. But would that have mattered? Having his daughter witness this side of him first-hand, seeing him fight the man that pointed a gun at him, and even accidentally harm her mom in the process was enough to make Rose run off. Usiku loses strength in his legs and falls knees first onto the floor, and he slams his hands onto the soft carpet. He sees his lapis lazuli bracelet and amethyst crystal bracelet, and he sees his rose quartz necklace dangling, and his body begins to tremble rapidly as tears begin to form in his eyes and his breath becomes unsteady.

## Chapter 9

Morgana goes through her emails, deleting old ones and starring important ones. She then goes through the trash bin to completely delete the emails forever, but before she could get started, her eyes spot one specific email from her boss from over 35 years ago. She opens it to see what it says.

*“Hello Morgana,*

*Just wanted to inform you that I’m holding you responsible for giving Anti the dosages from now on. It seems the Nurses are having a hard time with him. I believe he’ll obey you more since you two are very acquainted(bring out the flowers and wedding bells, jk)~ If you must know what this medication is for, it’s to help with Anti’s mental state. I believe that realm has tainted him to the point that he’s lost sight of the overall goal. This should do the trick. Soon, we’ll have the old Anti back, and we can get back to getting the show on the road! Thank you again, Morgana. I appreciate you.”*

*-Aidoneus*

Morgana immediately deletes the email and her mind begins to spin. She breathes in and out, trying to not remember the times that Kendo would be out of it and not know what was happening around him. She tries to push away the memories of him wailing out his misery and his constant flailing around like a bird trying to escape its cage. He would instantly smile the moment he saw Morgana walk in, only to be broken hearted when she had to fulfill her duty and drug him before Aidoneus had to come visit his son and do what he felt would help Kendo change. Morgana’s jade green eyes water, but she immediately wipes the tears away. She closes her eyes, creating an image of Kendo trapped, his hair a mess, and dark circles taking over his eyes. She speaks softly, “I’m sorry, Ken...So sorry... I know you told me that you were mad at

your father for choosing me...but I still felt terrible...because I agreed to do it. I'm sure if you were here now, you'd say that I had no choice. Oh Kenny....I hope you're feeling better now..."

Morgana replaces the desolate image of Kendo in her mind, and she replaces it with an image of him when she first met him. She blushes and giggles at the sight, remembering the joyful vibes he brought to her. She looks at the office phone and remembers she has to continue calling Aidoneus' friends, and she begins to call the third one.

...

The Greed District, the place in Umu where everyone's habit is gambling and stealing. The seven moons glow a vivid yellow, making everything in the district the color of greed. While there are a lot of restaurants here, there are plenty of casinos and hotels that the peonis can visit. Peonis are on the dusty roads carrying bags of blood rubies and food from other restaurants. Some even walk around in their pajamas. The tour-carriages pass by the fun-searching peonis, and the tour guide begins their explanation of the district. "Welcome to the Greed District! Here is where the real fun begins as you throw away your blood rubies in hopes of getting enough money to buy a mansion and getting the baddest tansi~! You can also get you some good food while being here~. There's also *a lot* of nice resorts and hotels for you to relax when you're worn out from all the fun~! It's not advised to brag about your winnings here, otherwise, a thief may come around and take it from you!"

The tour-carriages go through the town, passing by peonis that would toss up their blood rubies to brag how much they have and watch the money-hungry peonis grab and fight for it. There would also be peonis pick-pocketing other peonis, and no one comes to help. The newcomer-peonis then notice that some of the peonis either wear high-fashion clothing or simple rags, and the tour guide says, "Some of you may be wondering what the followers of Greed are

called, and unfortunately, just like Alphonse, the Greed Quphanto doesn't have a special name for her followers. *However*, she does have a name for the people who are so deep in debt...*dinner*. Why does she call them that? Well, lose a big bet and find out~!"

The tour-carriages then go towards the largest and tallest casino resort in the district. Its radiating yellow glow blinds the newcomer-peonis. They look up to see a huge platinum spider statue at the top of the establishment. The tour guide sees what they're looking at and says, "This is Platinum Paradise, home of Demona, the Quphanto of Greed~! Platinum Paradise has many sister locations, but this is the mother~! Many peonis *love* coming to this casino for many reasons~! Hotel rooms the size of apartments, good ass food, satisfactory housekeeping, and of course, the endless amount of games to play~! Also you may notice that when you walk into this place, there may be a lot of... stringy decorations~! No worries, it's not what you think... we're not in the Lust District, yet, but it's advised to not touch it~!"

Inside Platinum Paradise, many peonis and Upindeonis walk around either in rags or designer clothes, chatting away. Sounds of slot machines, chips being slammed onto the tables, cards being dealt, and sounds of victory screeches and wails of horror can be heard throughout the casino. Silver spider web can be found everywhere excluding the hotel rooms, hallways, and restaurants. On the top of the casino area is an extremely huge spider web, where many puppy-sized gold spiders with diamond eyes, rose-gold spiders with pearl eyes, and platinum spiders with sapphire eyes are crawling around creating more webs to make their place bigger. Gold, silver, bronze, rose-gold, and platinum items can be found in the web, glistening against the building's lights. Suddenly, some of the spiders reel in a peoni, the frightened soul struggling and screaming through the silver web that wraps around him tightly. The spiders then begin eating on the peoni's flesh, savoring the flavor of his skin and blood.

Minutes later, the peoni loses consciousness and strength, having no choice but to go back to his basic soul form, and only a white flame remains. The Reaper appears on the web, not phased by its stickiness, and grabs the white flame to take it back to the center of Umu where the hell-influenced soul can regain his form, although he'll have none of the belongings he's possessed or whatever abilities he's learned up to this point.

In the middle of the web lies a huge golden spider with a naked human woman for an upper body. Her golden spider legs curl up as she snores quietly. However, a rose-gold spider crawls towards the tan-skinned woman with a cell phone on its back as it's ringing.

*Ringringringringring! Ringringringringring!* The woman jumps up from her sleep and squeals. "Eep! Who dares to wake me up!?" she whines, shaking her head and making her golden wavy hair shimmy. Her yellow eyes with slit pupils light up in frustration to make up for the rest of her facial expression which is being covered by a glittery gold mask, but she picks up the phone and answers in a polite and cheerful voice. "Hellooooo~"

*"Hello, Master Demona. This is Morgana~"*

"MORGUE-Y~!! Oh my goodness~! How are you doing~?" Demona says, relaxing.

*"I-I'm doing okay. I hope I'm not bothering you."*

"Oh nooo~ I was just sleeping, waiting for my babies to find someone else for me to play with~ Teeheeheeheehee~!!" The spiders begin hissing at Demona, explaining to her what just happened. "*Gasps* You guys already ate one!? Awww, babies, you know I like tenderizing them first for you!"

*Hissss hiss hissss hisss hiisssss.*

"Awww, I'm sorry, babies. I understand, it has been a little slow lately..."

*"Um...Master Demona...?"*

“Oh right! Sorry, Morgue-y~! You were saying~?”

*“I was saying that you will have to postpone the playtime, Master. Lord Aidoneus is wanting you and the rest of the Quphantos to come by for a meeting.”*

“Huuuuuh!? But whyyyyy? I’d much rather stay here with my babies~! Not my fault that Aidoneus doesn’t know how to watch over his, and it’s not gonna be my responsibility to get his son back! Hmph!”

*“...An event is supposed to take place at the Colosseum soon, and he wanted your input on it.”*

“Wait wait... an event at the Colosseum? Held by Aidoneus!? It’s not going to be another one of Abigor’s tournaments?”

“No...”

“Not Alphonse’s eating competitions?”

“No...”

“...Not even Nasir’s fashion show?”

“No, Master...”

“.....Ophelia’s concert.”

“Noo...”

“Kal’s exhibition.”

“Ideya, no...”

“Vanity’s stand-up!”

“Master Demona....”

“Waaah!! The suspense is killing me, Morgue-y worg-y!! *At least* give me a hint!”

“**sighs**...*It’s an event that Aidoneus is holding, and it may or may not involve punishing his son...*”



“*Gasps!!* A publicity stunt~!! Why didn’t you just say so~? I’ll be there as soon as possible, Morgue-y~!”

“*Very good, Master Demona. See you soon.*”

Demona hangs up the phone, and she looks at her spiders. She says, “Oh, my babies~. Mama needs to go somewhere soon~! So make something that’ll make mama look really nice in front of her friends, okay~? And take care of this place while I’m gone~! Oouuuu, this is going to be fun~! Teeheeheeheeheeheeheehee~!!”

## Chapter 10

July 2017

Afternoon

Tenacity cuddles her best friend, Rose (who decided to take off the dress she was wearing and decided to wear one of her friend's robes), and she listens to the hectic experience the Quphanto/human hybrid had to go through. They wait for their other friends to make their arrival, though Rose is grateful that she has some time to recover. Amethyst and Alexander stand around the kitchen area, giving the two best friends some space while also hearing what's been going on.

"Wow...." Tenacity whispers, taking in the fact that Rose's father was pretty much a serial killer that was a part of a gang along with Shandon, that the bats are her aunts, and that Usiku and Shandon got into a fight and hurt Delilah in the process. "Rose, I'm so sorry that this happened," she says softly as she caresses Rose's head.

"*Sniffles* I don't know if I can look at any of them the same anymore," Rose whimpers, "I can't bear the idea of even being in that house!"

"I wouldn't blame you," Tenacity says, shaking her head, "If I found out my dad was a murderer and my uncle pulled out a gun to try to prove a point, I'd distance myself too... probably never see them again until like 10 years later after finding a new location, ya know?"

"*Sighs* Yeah..."

"Maybe a name change, but that's probably doing too much."

"Hmhmhmhm, not really. Hey...is it okay if I crash here...? Just for a little while...?"

"Of course, Rose. Hey, mi casa es su casa. I think I still have some of your clothes stashed somewhere in my closet from last time you stayed over."

"Oh yeah! Hmhmhmhm~ The Senior Slumber Party..."

"The week-long event that was hosted by our *beloved* Jackie..."

“And the event where I accidentally left one of my bags here.”

“Make that two, hehe...”

“What!? Uuuugh I knew I shouldn’t have rushed...”

“Can’t blame you, your dad was acting like we kidnapped you...”

“Yeah... Good thing it was mom picking me up, right?.....sighs...”

As much as they want to continue reminiscing about the activities they did with Jacqueline after their graduation, the mentioning of Usiku sparks a question in Tenacity’s mind. “...Hey,” Tenacity begins, looking at the ceiling, “Do....Do you think that....Nah, never mind.”

Rose perks up and looks at Tenacity with a rose-red face. “What?” she says softly.

“It’s just...” Tenacity tries to find the right words to say to her friend. However, the question that she’s wanting to ask involves someone close to her.

Remembering their conversation earlier, she thinks about her own parents and how they revealed most of their past to her. What raises her curiosity is that this person’s story sounds much similar to Shandon and Usiku’s. As much as she wants to comfort Rose with her own experience and perhaps make a connection, she really can’t, and she cannot open her mouth to talk about her family because of one promise. That one phrase keeps ringing in her head...

***“Leave the past in the past. Let’s not ever mention this to anyone, okay, Ten? It’s not their business.”*** Tenacity’s heart tears itself apart trying to choose what to do. She wants to tell Rose the things that she has learned about her people, but unfortunately she doesn’t want to feel regret stabbing her in her chest and guts when she breaks her promise.

“Tee, what’s up??” Rose asks again, clearing her throat.

After careful thinking, Tenacity finally says, “...Did your uncle say what gang he and Usiku used to be in??”

“Hm?” Rose blinks rapidly. “No... No he didn’t. He just said it was a gang in Louisiana. Don’t bother asking me what their gang color was, because he didn’t really reveal that either...why??”

“...Well-”

*Knock! Knock! Knock!* The door being disturbed interrupts Tenacity and Rose’s conversation. Amethyst goes to look through the peephole to see only Jacqueline and Nermal. She opens the door and says, “Hello, girls.” The duo say their hello’s back, and Amethyst steps out of the way to let the two friends walk straight to Tenacity and Rose. She watches them get in a group hug, and she looks at Alexander and signals that they should leave. He catches on, and they take their exit.

Amethyst and Alexander walk down the hallway, making their way to exit the building, and Alexander breaks the silence and says, “So...uh...Mwezi is gonna love hearing about his son pretty much following in his footsteps for a little while.”

Amethyst rolls her eyes and sighs, “Alex, he’s not walking down that road, anymore, so there’s no point in telling him. Mwezi would just be disappointed...”

“Hey, has Usiku even visited his parents? Like at all??” Alexander ponders.

“No... he hasn’t. Not that I know of, anyway.”

“He should... Hell, *we* should.”

“Why should *we* check on *them*? We were just simply their servants.”

“Yeah, but you can’t deny that we developed some sort of relationship with them!”

Amethyst stops at her tracks and looks at her lover with a face of disbelief. Alexander looks at her with his hand on the door to the exit and asks, “What??”

“...We’ll discuss this when we get to the car,” Amethyst says, and they exit the building and make it to the van.

Meanwhile, the girls get comfortable and catch up on what Rose has learned, Tenacity never getting the chance to make the connection she believes is there. Tenacity then asks, “Where’s MeeMee? She’s not coming??”

Nermal answers, “Her parents are pretty much holding her hostage. She said in the group chat that she’s gotta ‘lay low’ for a little while.”

“Damn,” Tenacity mumbles.

“Well, at least we don’t have to worry about any other crazy events, now,” Rose says, “For now, the only drama that’s going on is me and dad...”

“And MeeMee and her dad...” Nermal chimes in.

“Uugh, and soon it’ll be me and *my* dad,” Jacqueline adds.

“Why what’s happening?... *Besides* your dad messing with your bank account,” Tenacity asks, giving Jacqueline a raised eyebrow.

“We’re having a family dinner soon, and dad is wanting to talk school bizz...” Jacqueline groans out.

“Oh...just for you, or?” Rose questions.

“Yeah, just for me. He’s not really worried about Nermal,” Jacqueline explains, “The only thing he’s asking Nermal to do is get good grades and do something productive with that singing of hers.”

“Oh! Well look at you, NeeNee, on the Money Man's good side,” Tenacity says, almost sarcastically as if she knows that he’s only nice to Nermal because she’s not much of a ‘wild thing’ like Jacqueline is.

“Yeah... speaking of which, that dinner is going to happen in a couple hours,” Nermal laughs out nervously, “And I’m letting you know, Jackie, I’m going to Burger Queen.”

“What!? You’re not gonna eat with me!?” Jacqueline whines.

“Jackie, this is my first time copping out of the family dinner this month, chill out!” Nermal retorts back, “Plus, you know I don’t like how you and your dad start arguing while me and mom are trying to eat.”

“Uuugh, fair enough, but daaamn!” Jacqueline whines some more, knowing that she’s going to have to be on the battlefield alone this time. Nermal doesn’t usually jump into the father-daughter argument, but the free-spirited young adult feels better when Nermal is there as her witness and emotional support since their mom only chooses to do the bare minimum.

Suddenly, soft snores can be heard throughout the room, and the girls see that Rose fell asleep on the couch. She takes up the majority of the couch, laying down and cuddling a pillow, her feet resting on Tenacity’s lap. Tenacity gently gets off the couch and rests Rose’s feet on the remaining area of the couch, and she decides to sit on the single, gray couch. “*Poor Rosie,*” Nermal whispers, “*She’s been through so much today.*”

“*Man, we should, like, try to do something together to cheer her and MeeMee up!*” Jacqueline whispers in excitement.

“*And exactly what are your ideas of cheering them up?*” Tenacity asks quietly.

“*Let’s do something fun like fighting each other!*” Jacqueline exclaims.

“*Wait, you mean like sparring??*” Nermal asks, scrunching up her face in curiosity, while Tenacity looks at Jacqueline in disapproval.

“*Please, I’m sure MeeMee will settle with taking her to Olivia Giardino or McRonald’s,*” Tenacity rebuttals.

“*Why the hell would she want to go to either one of those places?*” Jacqueline asks, puzzled.

“*Pasta. Fries. You know. Her comfort food,*” Tenacity explains through her frustration.

“*Why you don’t wanna spar, TeeTee~? Are you afraid you’re gonna lose~?*” Jacqueline teases.

Suddenly, a white bat phases through the wall, and it comes out of the Spirit Realm. A bright light covers the bat as it takes the form of a young adult man, and it’s revealed to be Issei. The girls gasp at the sight, but Rose still sleeps through the excitement. Issei looks at the girls and says, “Can we make a bet?”

“What the fuc- You know what? Don’t answer that,” Tenacity interrupts herself as she gets up from her seat and walks towards the peoni hunter. “What kind of bet are you exactly thinking of?”

Issei gets comfortable by taking off a heavy book bag and places it near the entrance. He clears his throat and looks into Tenacity’s brown eyes and says, “If I win a fight against you, I will take you out on a date *and* we’ll have a sleepover~!”

“Hah!!” Tenacity scoffs at Issei’s offer.

“Okay, what do you want if *you* win?” Issei asks, smirking.

“A year without you asking me out,” Tenacity bluntly says, blushing red.

“Okay,” Issei says, “So is that a deal?”

“Whoa whoa whoa hold up!” Jacqueline jumps in.

“What you mean ‘hold up’?” Tenacity says, scrunching up her face.

“If *I* win, all of you have to go to a party with me~” Jacqueline chimes in, a sinful grin growing on her face.

“And if I beat you, Jackie, you can’t force me to go to a party for a year,” Issei fights back.

“And if *I* beat you, no more asking me to go to a party for a decade,” Tenacity adds, glaring into Jacqueline’s sparkling, green eyes.

“Hey, we should wait until Melissa is around to plan all of this,” Nermal interrupts the three. “I’ll at least text her to let her know, though. Where are we going to do this? And when??”

“Hm...” Tenacity looks at the sleeping Rose, Rose snoring throughout the commotion. She continues, “I’m sure Rose will probably know the best place. Better yet, Amethyst could suggest somewhere. Speaking of Amy, where did she go??”

“I dunno. She left with her boo as soon as she let us in,” Jacqueline explains.

“Oh, that’s strange, we didn’t add her to the group chat?” Nermal ponders.

“Well, we never got her phone number,” Tenacity tells Nermal.

“Oh... Well, we should get it the next time we see her!” Nermal cheerfully suggests.

“So, this sparring thing is official,” Issei states.

“Hell yeah~! It’ll be tomorrow during the afternoon~!” Jacqueline confirms.

Tenacity looks at the clock, remembering Jacqueline’s family dinner, and she ruins the moment and says, “Hey, don’t you have that dinner you have to attend to?”

“Eewww, don’t remind me!!” Jacqueline groans. Her brain instantly fogs up with frustration and anxiety from the thought of eating with her mom and dad. Her heart races as if it’s in a maze, trying to find the exit.

Before Jacqueline can try to convince Nermal to stay with her, Nermal says, “Oop! My Dazzle is here. Well, I better get going. Jackie, good luck with your dad! Tee? Issei? I’ll see you whenever! And tell Rosie I said I love her! Buh-bye!” Everyone except the sleeping Quphanto descendent says their goodbyes to the half-Samaka as she makes her exit. Jacqueline checks her



phone and sees that her Dazzle is getting closer to her. She lets out a long sigh, which leads to Tenacity walking up to her and rubbing her back.

“Hey, let me know what happens at the family dinner,” Tenacity requests, “Matter of fact, just text us while you’re at dinner if you’re really going to need someone else to talk to.”

“Yeah, that’s even if my dad will let me,” Jacqueline mutters.

“Hm? You’re the Queen of sneaking your phone. What do you mean?” Tenacity wonders.

“Never mind. I’m just going to let dad yap away and not say shit,” Jacqueline says as she rolls her eyes. She groans loudly as she starts pulling her own moon-white hair. Thoughts of her dad nagging her endlessly run around in circles in her head.

Issei watches Tenacity and Jacqueline wrap up their conversation, and they hug each other for the last time before Jacqueline leaves the apartment. He gets closer to Tenacity, but she notices and takes a few steps back. “Sooooooo, you wanna hang out, Tenacity?” Issei says, giving a derpy smile.

Tenacity gives him a stank face and raised eyebrow combo, but immediately fixes her face and looks at Rose and says, “Eh, I mean what do you have planned? I have a distressed best friend here at the moment, and I think I’m going to have two more come here at any second, that’s if one of them can even get out of the house.”

Issei’s derpy face disappears, and he immediately grabs his book bag. He gently places it on the table. He takes out two books that are titled *The Fallen Malaiki* and *Umu’s Savior*. Issei says, “I’ll cut to the chase, I’ve been doing some research, and something tells me that we need to be ready to fry bigger fish.”

“...What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the Devil.”

“Oh...Oh god, don't tell me, does this involve Kendo in any way?”

“Precisely! Ever since I've been roped into this craziness, I've been having an iffy feeling, like something major was going to take place if we don't do something about it. Now check this out.” As he prepares his presentation, he grabs for *The Fallen Malaiki*, its book cover displaying an anguished Upendelaiki walking down the stairway to Maza and more Upendelaikis and Malaikis watching from above the clouds. “So this book tells a story about a certain Upendelaiki betraying his people. He tried to convince other Mazans to join him in fulfilling his cause.”

“Lemme guess, this Upendelaiki is the Devil,” Tenacity assumes, not really showing much interest.

“Yeah,” Issei confirms, “The Devil wanted to spread darkness into Earth, and  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the Mazans were convinced to come along with him.”

“But Issei, we know this story already. He got jealous of Ideya's power, so he decided to go to the dark side since no one really agreed with him rebelling.”

“But the thing is, *Umu's Savior* tells the story a little differently.” After saying that, he lifts up *Umu's Savior*, its book cover revealing Upindeonis and peonis looking up to an Upendelaiki with growing horns. “In this version, he apparently *wanted* to help Maza have more control over Gaia, but the Mazans didn't like how he basically tried to take control so they *kicked him out*. The devil found Umu and immediately went to work after seeing how empty and dead the realm seemed.”

“Huh?” Tenacity perks up.

“Yeah,” Issei explains, “Umu didn't always have the lakes of fire we grew up learning about. It just consisted of peonis and Upindeonis doing their thing, not making any progressions within their own realm or Gaia. The devil recruited most of the Mazans, and he made an agreement with

the Reaper and the higher ups of Maza. The souls that have attempted to enter Maza but are deemed unfit are to be taken straight to Umu to become part of the Fallen, souls that are thrown to the pits to be in pain for eternity and to give more life into the hellish realm.”

“Wow, so basically, he created an energy source for Umu... in order to make the realm stronger,” Tenacity concludes.

“And he isn’t finished. Not in the slightest,” Issei points out, but before he can continue to make his points, Tenacity grabs one of the books to examine who wrote it and when it was published. However, she doesn’t see any type of credit.

“Where exactly did you get these books??” Tenacity asks him.

“From the Shrouded Library,” Issei immediately answers.

“The Shrouded Library?? You mean that shady library that everyone was always talking about being haunted?”

“Yep! And honestly, it could be, but that’s where you learn most about mythical beings that roam around this world, including my folks~!”

“Wow...”

“And I’m giving you these two books to start off with~!”

“H-Huh!?”

“Yeah, I finished them, and now I believe I know what’s going on.”

“Well, hold on, at least tell me what you have in mind before you straight up abandon me!”

“The devil is not done. If both of these books hold some sort of truth within them, then that means that he is indeed trying to be God, but instead of being a god for the light, he’s wanting to be a god for the darkness, the place where he was accepted quickly simply because of his

apparent hatred towards his former brethren who doubted him and feared for the worst to happen if they were to keep him around.”

“So...” Tenacity walks around to think about what’s been said thus far, her heart pounding and brain calculating every single possibility and plan that the Devil could be conjuring up. “The devil... Power... God... Earth....Kendo.... Holy shit, is he trying to use Kendo as a way to take over the universe!?”

“That’s exactly what I think he’s doing,” Issei agrees, “By having himself and his son, he’s going to find a way to force two realms together, and have Umu’s influence take over Earth.”

Tenacity mutters, “As if his influence isn’t already strong enough...”

“I know, but he’s going to make it to where humans won’t have a chance in salvation. We will be able to see peonis causing so much havoc and lava pits appearing everywhere. It would pretty much be a bad remix of Judgement Day if we don’t do something about it.”

“Well, we won’t have to worry about Kendo since we pretty much took care of that situation. But then again, this is his dad we’re talking about. Hmm... How would he go about using his son to try and bring Umu here, anyways? I get he’s the devil, but like we said, he ain’t somethin’ like a Quphanto.”

“I have my ideas... but I think what will give me the answer is within *The Reaper’s Contract*.”

“Lord have mercy, the reaper’s *what?*”

“I know I know, I’m not gonna say anymore. Just read those two books first. I’ll work on getting that third book. But Tee... I truly believe that we have a bigger situation in our hands.”

“Well, *clearly*...But you makin’ it seem like *we* can do something about it.”

“Well, we did something about Kendo, right? Surely, there’s a way to finish this completely.”

“Why are you so interested??”

“C’mon, Tenacity, the world is in danger! If I can whoop on peonis for a hobby, I’m sure I can put up a fight with the devil himself. Of course, I’ll need some backup in case things get sticky.”

“Hmm...Maybe we should talk to Amy and Alex when they come back.”

“We’ll probably have a better chance talking to Thomas. He can hate my guts all he wants to, he’ll be more of a help since his twin hasn’t been keeping up with events within the spiritual dimensions.”

“You’re probably right..”

Suddenly, Rose slowly opens her eyes, seeing Tenacity and Issei bonding, but the duo don’t notice her awakening. She recollects all of the information she’s heard between them. As much as she wants to let them know that she listened to everything, she decides to close her eyes again, thinking to herself. *They’re wanting to figure out this master plan, she says to herself, I want to know where Amethyst comes into play. Surely, they haven’t forgotten about Alex and Thomas being held captive... right? Those Umu people kept them alive for a reason... they wanted Amy... but why?*

## Chapter 11

July 2017

Evening

The dining room is dimly lit with candles and the golden chandelier, softly exposing the white and gray colors on the marble floor and white color on the walls. The windows are closed, blocking out the warm rays of the setting sun. A chef prepares the food in three silver platters, letting the soft jazz that plays through the Perplexa speakers soothe him and prepare him to walk through the heavy atmosphere that hangs around the Brookes family. Jacqueline sits at the round, white table across from her mother and father, Selena and Cole Brookes. When it comes to family dinners, they all still have to look their best even if it's in their own home; warm-beige skinned Cole wears his gray tux and dress pants with his maple brown hair slicked back; neutral-beige skinned Selena wears a sparkling purple sleeveless dress with her blonde hair in an elegant beehive hairstyle; and fair skinned Jacqueline wears a shimmering light-blue long sleeved dress with the top half of her white hair in two ponytails and the bottom half flowing straight down her back.

The chef comes out of the kitchen area and walks towards the family holding three silver platters. He places the platters in front of each family member and removes the lids to reveal what they are having. Steam dances off the 16 oz. medium rare sirloin steak, collard greens, and macaroni and cheese, and their scents caress everyone's noses. "I hope you will all enjoy," the chef says kindly. "Do any of you need refills?"

Cole looks at the chef with still, light-green eyes and stoically says, "More wine, please."

Selena looks at the chef with warm, hazel eyes and softly says, "I'd like some water, this time. One glass of wine is enough for me~. Hmhmhmhm~!"

Jacqueline doesn't say anything and instead glues her eyes onto her phone underneath the table, her phone brightness on low. She texts to her friends in their group chat.

**Jacqueline:** *Well... it's starting... I don't know what y'all are doing, but just pray for me. We haven't started talking yet, but I can tell this is about to be a bumpy ride... 🙄*

“Sweetie?” Jacqueline looks up to see her mother talking. “Do you want some more soda?” Selena asks.

“...Sure... thanks, Phillipe,” Jacqueline says, clearly showing that she doesn't want to be here. Phillipe, the chef, nods his head and walks back to the kitchen area to get their drinks. The family begins to eat their food, taking their time in silence, letting the jazz music soothe their ears. Minutes pass, and no word has been uttered out, yet, giving Phillipe a chance to bring their beverages with no problem. Jacqueline takes the chance to check her phone once again.

**Tenacity:** *It'll be okay, Jackie. I ain't never really met your folks, but judging how they've always let you do what you wanted to, I'm sure they're only going to act seriously about your career path and then totally forget about it the moment college starts.*

**Melissa:** *I don't know, if her dad was able to pull out \$300 from her account just for not telling them about our “camping trip”, there's no telling what he'll do next. Just hang in there, Jackie.*

**Tenacity:** *If he does end up doing something drastic, I'll be shocked.*

**Melissa:** *What do you think he'll do next? Force her to stay at home while attending classes online?*

**Tenacity:** *God, that sounds like the perfect torture for Jackie. I was thinking he'd let her live on campus, but she would have to have a bodyguard pretty much watching over her the whole time.*

**Melissa:** *Eeewww, that's just as bad!! 🤞🙄*

“Jacqueline.” Jacqueline bolts her head up at the calm but booming sound of Cole’s voice. His face shows no expression. No happiness. No sadness. No anger. Just simple Cole, looking at his daughter with his thin lips pressed together. “We’re only weeks away before your college life begins. How do you feel?” Cole asks, not touching his food.

“I feel fine.” Jacqueline responds, her cheerfulness not present.

“Well, this is where you need to become a little serious,” Cole bluntly explains, “This is where you can either make your life easier or make it much harder than what it needs to be. College is a place meant for you to hone in your skills and earn the paper that will give you access to many opportunities. Now, I could simply retire and give the business responsibilities to you, but as you have made clear numerous times, you are not interested, which is fine. However, whatever you choose to do will also affect the family image in the business world. Everyone knows what you have done during high school.” The mentioning of high school makes Jacqueline’s eyes roll intensely. Cole continues, “It is because of my money that I was able to help you graduate. I’ve had to pay numerous news reporters to not go to social media to talk about how reckless and promiscuous you were... and still are. And to be fair... the way you behave is my fault. Instead of punishing you, I covered up for you. So now, we’re going to do things quite differently.”

“I can’t have fun?” Jacqueline interrupts, with a crumpled face.

“Excuse me?” Cole questions.

“All that you just said... You make it sound like I was supposed to be this controlled, ‘mature’ teenager during highschool,” Jacqueline says.

“Yes. As my daughter, Jacqueline, you were supposed to be mature. Responsible. Determined. A role model for your peers. But instead, you’ve become this bedazzled hood rat-”



“Wow-”

“That thinks she’s supposed to be here on this Earth for a fun time, not a long time and that she’s too pretty to do real work.”

“*Scoffs* Okay.”

“Do you not agree?”

“The only reason I do what I do is because it’s boring in this house. You guys are always busy. Like, you’re never home. What do you expect me to do?”

“*We* are doing what *adults* are supposed to do: working. Taking care of the household by paying bills. *Taking responsibility*. Right now, you’re just being a leech that doesn’t want to grow up.”

*Really?* Jacqueline thinks to herself, biting her tongue at this point. Her heart beats at a rapid pace, anger begins to slowly muddy up her brain. Selena stays silent, continuing to eat her food while her husband continues to talk down their daughter.

Cole continues, not planning to stop, “Take a look at your mom for example. She’s a well-known actress and tv game show hostess. Do you think *she* got to where she was by partying and laying in a different bed everyday? No, she worked her ass off making the proper connections and seizing every opportunity given to her.” Selena blushes dark-pink from her husband’s compliments. “Drama classes. Stand-ups at cafes. She was even booed the first time she got on stage, but she still kept trying.”

“Yeah, mom was forced to do that stuff, wasn’t she?” Jacqueline rebuttals, trying to find a way to win the argument.

Before Selena could add her voice to the conversation, Cole jumps in, “Her parents were hard on her because they knew that her talent could take her to places they would *never* be able to see. They gave her the push that she needed to fly.”

Jacqueline’s lips are super-glued. What can she say to that? Her mom truly does enjoy her career. Silence starts to settle in until Selena finally says, “Yes, Jacqueline... I do love my work. And although I was upset at the time with my parents, my silly young self just didn’t realize that they were only trying to cheer for me the best they knew how to. But... I know what you’re trying to say.” Selena then looks at her husband with serene sunset eyes and says, “Cole, honey, she’s trying to tell you that we should spend some more time with her.” She looks back at her daughter and smiles, “Go on, dear. Just tell us when and where we should spend more family time, and we’ll make it hap-”

“See, that’s what’s wrong with her now,” Cole growls out, “You’re always giving her what she wants. And to be fair... I’ve been condoning it. She needs to understand that she can’t get what she wants every single time. She should be grateful that we’re able to spend time together like this since our schedules are always busy. It’s a miracle that we can make this happen.”

“Wow, so you’re putting your work over me,” Jacqueline sneers.

“That’s not what I’m doing. I’m putting the food on the table and the clothes on your back. If it weren’t for me and your mom, you’d be out in the streets hoping that an older man would come to take care of you,” Cole bites back.

*Fuck you,* Jacqueline curses inside her head. Sweat begins to form from her clenched fists, but she hides them underneath the table.

“I’m not going to keep doing this with you, Jacqueline,” Cole says, rubbing the side of his head, “Let’s just agree that we all played a part in your rambunctious reputation. Now...back to

college. This is your chance to clean up your act and show the public that you hold the family name with pride and that you would never wear it only for the benefits. You love partying... so get a degree that will land you a job in party planning. You'd be an A-List planner that every celebrity and model is going to want to hire." Jacqueline stays silent. Her food has only been touched a few times. The steam is gone.

Selena swallows her food, and while Cole continues eating his, she chimes in with, "Or you could become a makeup artist! I've seen how much work you've put into your makeup, and it's always beautiful, sweetie. Better yet, *you* can be the model attending the party! Fashion shows, runways, and parties to relieve stress while also making a living!" Jacqueline still stays quiet, staring at her food, but her mouth and stomach aren't wanting to welcome it.

Cole jumps back in, "Believe me, you do not want to work a 9-5 on minimum wage, Jacqueline. These opportunities we're offering you are only once in a lifetime for most people. And you've been blessed with the Brookes name, so seizing these opportunities will be even easier for you to grasp. So, whatever degree you go for, it is up to you. In a week, I'll need to know if you're wanting to live on campus or if you'll be commuting here at home, and I'll tell you why." Cole's words flow out like a calm waterfall now compared to earlier where he was a harsh ocean storm. Although Cole and Selena are only trying to set Jacqueline up for success, Jacqueline internally begs to get out of the dining room. The talk of her past decisions and blank future makes her feel like she's been pushed to the edge of a plank and will soon have to walk off of it to an ocean filled with sharks and who knows what other sea creature that will want to devour her.

Cole takes a sip of his wine, and he continues, “In order for you to become the young working woman you’re supposed to be, I need to play my part... correctly. If you choose to commute here, you will have to start paying some sort of bill. The wifi bill should be a good start.”

“Huh!?” Jacqueline exclaims, making Selena choke on her water. She tries to keep her coughs quiet since she doesn’t want to disturb the conversation.

Cole says, “Whether it be through your scholarship money or money you earn from a small job, you’re going to have to pay up. Once college starts, responsibilities are going to slowly fall in. But not to worry. Your college fees, tuition, books, and other materials will be paid for, of course. You’ll just have to worry about keeping up with that one simple bill.”

“Why do I have to start paying to live under *my own house!*!?” Jacqueline yells.

However, her outbursts don’t faze her father as he says, “Same reason for your mother and me when it comes to paying bills. We may own this house, but we still have to pay to keep the lights and electricity on and water running. Plus, look at this as practice for when you get your own spot. I’m giving you a chance to practice your budgeting skills. Maybe now, you won’t go out so much and actually be a grown up.”

“And what’s gonna happen if I choose to live in the dorms!?”

“Then I will be monitoring your bank account.”

*BA-BUMP!* Jacqueline’s heart instantly went from being at the top of the eiffel tower, to jumping off of it.

“Do you really think I’m just going to let you repeat the mistakes of the past and present? Again, I’ll pay for everything, but then you and I will go half-in-half on the dorm payments, and you will also only be allowed to buy the necessities. Food, clothes, whatever will help you with your studies, that is what I want to see on your purchase history. If there’s a single payment that I

ask you about, and you can't give me a straight answer, then I'll lock you out and you won't be able to use your card for a short period of time. Or would you prefer that I just take half of your money away? However you want to do it, you're going to learn how to be responsible and take care of your business. You'll be in college to learn, not to party and potentially have three kids with three different men."

"....And what if I don't want to go to college?" Jacqueline finally asks. Cole and Selena's eyes simultaneously pop wide open.

"What do you mean 'if you don't want to go to college'?" Cole sneers, squinting his eyes.

"I mean ever since freshman year of highschool, I have not been thinking about my future the way you two have," Jacqueline says with a clear voice, trying to keep her composure. "Unlike you two, I'm actually tryna have fun with my life. All you two talk about is work, work, money, business, money, work. The shit is sooo irritating!"

"Jacqueline!" Selena squeaks out.

"I gave up tryna spend time with y'all because y'all would do exactly what you're doing now: Push me away and just settle with dinners as a way we could all at least talk to each other. If having such a career equates to always being on the grind with not taking a moment to enjoy my family, friends, or even have time to myself, then I don't want it!" Jacqueline expresses, now standing up from her seat, looking straight into her father's eyes.

"So we're just going to spill our true intentions onto the table, hm?" Cole growls out, standing up from his seat now, "Well, while you're over there complaining about the most futile things, I could sit here and mention how I would go back in time and stop that Umrha from saving you if I could, but you don't see me doing that, now do you?"

*BA-BUMP. BA-BUMP. BA-BUMP.* Jacqueline's expression changes from power to desolation. Cole's double edged tongue doesn't stop, "Perhaps there was a reason why you were supposed to die at the hospital the day you were born. We couldn't see that you were going to be an ungrateful wench that would only rely on her parents' hard work and money so that she can just sit on her ass and not do anything productive."

"Cole!!" Selena gets up from her seat and stands beside her daughter. "Now you've gone too far!" she screams, furrowing her brows.

"No no, Selena, let's really talk about it," Cole snarls, "What has Jacqueline done to pay us back? She turns out to be our second child, about to meet the same fate as the first, but by the grace of Ideya, an Umrha who worked at that hospital managed to save her. And how does Jacqueline show her appreciation?"

"BY HAVING FUN WITH MY LIFE!! THAT'S HOW!" Jacqueline screams back.

"NO! BY WASTING IT AWAY WITH UNFULFILLING ACTIVITIES!" Cole finally screams back.

"SHE'S STILL OUR DAUGHTER, COLE!" Selena yells at her husband, tears stinging her eyes.

"SHE'S A DISAPPOINTMENT TO THE FAMILY, SELENA!" Cole exclaims.

Everything becomes white noise. What Selena and Cole are saying in their argument are muffled. Jacqueline's feet force her to get away from her parents and burst out of the house after getting sick of hearing the mercilessly honest feelings from her cold-blooded father. She decides to walk down the driveway, trying to hold back the sniffles that attempt to escape her quivering lips. However, her eyes fail to stop her tears from falling. She calls for a Dazzle to pick her up and take her to the creamery. While she waits for the Dazzle, she calls the group chat, hoping

that someone will pick up. After several seconds, someone finally picks up and says,  
“Hellooooo~?”

## Chapter 12

Morgana stands next to the water cooler in the break room, drinking her cold water in a paper cup. While the other workers talk amongst themselves and share their daily gossip and office rumors, Morgana stays to herself and does not make any eye contact with anyone. She instead thinks about Kendo and the conversations they would have in his room. That is where she would rather be right now...his room. Suddenly, a light bulb goes off in her head as she immediately walks out of the break room and back to her office.

She walks into her office and goes through her bottom drawer, and she digs for a black pearlescent key. She holds onto the key tightly to the point it feels like the key could merge into her hand at any second, and she immediately goes to Kendo's room which is a few stories above her. She takes the elevator and speeds down the hallway to a black door covered by numerous pictures of Kendo with humans smiling and laughing at a party or a gathering with a piece of notebook paper that says 'WARNING: HUMAN LOVER'. "Oh Kenny," Morgana sighs out, "You did whatever you could to make sure no one didn't come in here." She inserts the key and twists it, and she hears a click.

She opens the door, and she is welcomed by black walls covered in more pictures of humans that Kendo has interacted with along with pictures of nature, no sight of a window. She also notices the spotless black carpet, remembering how Kendo would usually dirty it with his clothes and empty wine bottles. Kendo's bronze long mirror still leans against one of the walls, waiting for someone to stand in front of it, but Morgana decides to avoid it to not look at herself. Her eyes then rest on the white king-sized bed, memories of Kendo and her laying on it begin to flood in. She takes off her glasses and shoes, and she plops onto the bed, caressing the smooth satin covers. She looks up at the ceiling, getting lost in the silver modern chandelier made of diamonds. She speaks softly, "I hope you're enjoying yourself, Ken... But I also hope that you're



having the worst time... I didn't want to admit it in front of you...but I hate it when you talk about humans the way you do...especially what you are doing with them. I sometimes wish you wouldn't go into so much detail. I'm not in love with you or anything... I just want you all to myself sometimes. Is that so wrong...? I guess so... since you're not craving to be with a peoni. What are we then...?"

She then thinks about what Kendo would say to answer her question. If Kendo was here, he would probably give her the same answer he's been giving her ever since she's started working for his father. "*I may have an obsession over humans, but you're the only peoni I have eyes for~*" Her heart giggles from the line that hooked her in and her stomach begins feeling like someone is rubbing a feather against it. Suddenly her phone notifies her that someone texted her. She looks at the text message.

**Aidoneus:** *Morgana, my dear, how's everything with inviting my friends?*

**Morgana:** *Almost finished, sir. Just have to call four of them now.*

**Aidoneus:** *Excellent. I'll check again later~ I appreciate you~.*

She lets out a frustrated sigh, and she scratches her head, making her kinky red hair dance. She then thinks of an idea. *I don't have to call from the office phone*, she thinks to herself, *I can just call them through my cell phone*. With that being said, she goes through her contacts to find the next friend she has to call. *This way I don't have to leave this room...I don't want to...*

...

The Envy District, the place in Umu where looking the best and having people wish they were someone else are a necessity. The seven moons glow a deep green, making everything and everyone within the district illuminate the color of envy. Peonis and Upindeonis in designer clothes and shoes, weighed down by exquisite jewelry, walk around the district with their noses

up in the air. They pass by art museums, stores that sell clothes, jewelry, and/or shoes, and lively fashion studios that are preparing for a fashion show that is taking place at the center of the district.

Tour-carriages prance through the glitter covered ground as upbeat runway music echoes throughout the district. The tour guide bops their head as they look at their newcomers, and they grab their megaphone to say, “Welcome to the Envy District, home of the models and artists of Umu~! If you’re wanting to see your artwork be worn or displayed for many to gawk at and wish they had your skills, or be the one *wearing* the artwork, this district is perfect for you~! This district has the BEST clothing, the BEST jewelry, the BEST shoes~! If you’re trying to say sorry to your side-piece, this is the best place to take them~!” The newcomers giggle and laugh at the tour guide’s joke as they take in the beautiful and glamorous view. They notice the numerous electronic billboards advertising the many designers and models that reside in this district. The tour guide says, “Even though this place seems like a peaceful place, there’s actually a lot of rivals here trying to take each other out. Don’t be surprised when you notice a model you were admiring earlier missing.”

The carriages make it to the Desire Plaza, an area where more boujee peonies hang around and gossip. A huge empty runway is being decorated, and models at the back of the stage are receiving finishing touches. The biggest and tallest building of the district resides in the plaza, its sparkling green glow taking over the area with its envious and pompous vibes. The tour guide continues as the carriages slowly walk around the plaza. “This is the Desire Plaza~! This is where the magic is showcased and the Envy Quphanto, Nasir, stays~! While art museums hold their quiet and maintained exhibitions, the Desire Plaza allows anything and everything to pop off~! You may express your fashion sense however you want to~! Someone in the audience

might get injured from the props you or your models use, but hey, that's just a way to make a statement~! Now some of you may be wondering... what are the residents of this district called? The artists, shoe designers, fashion designers, everyone that creates and contributes to this society are simply called Artisans. The models who help sell their designated Artisan's products are called Muses. If you would like to be the consumer of this society and show off your support through wearing the artwork around these dangerous streets, you are simply considered part of the Bourgeoisie~! So you better have the blood rubies to even get into this society, otherwise, you're gonna be the laughing stock.

“Now, as you can tell, the Envy Quphanto, Nasir, was quite interested in and inspired by the humans' Renaissance era. He actually was very envious of his fellow Quphanto friends and how they somehow found their main selling point for their districts. For Envy, it can be almost anything. Same thing for Pride. However, for Master Nasir, he wanted to take the ‘fabulous’ route. He wanted to take a route that would not only make him stand out more, but strike some sort of envy from his Quphanto pals or their followers that could only wish they could live the glamorous life~” the tour guide explains, but most of the newcomers are too distracted by the bedazzlement of the Muses and members of the bourgeoisie strutting as if the streets are also their runway.

Inside the huge, green building, many artisans draw out their designs, sew up two pieces of fabric, or place their product on mannequins to see how it all fits. At the top floor, an olive-brown skinned man with sleeked, dark-green hair with one strand resting on his forehead, goes through his jewelry. His peridot-green eyes sparkle at the sight of the diamonds, rubies, amethysts, and sapphires as the light bounces against them. He goes to a gold, long mirror to see how the jewelry he chose looks on him. His silky blue tuxedo and dress pants along with his

silky green tuxedo vest, diamond studded dress shoes, and his glittery green, blue, and purple peacock feathers clash with the jewelry he picked out, and he lets out a growl of frustration.

“Goddammit!!” he yells out, his long ears twitching. “Maybe today is one of those days that I don’t need jewelry...” He goes through his jewelry once more and grabs silver jewelry with diamonds and purple marble beads, and immediately, he goes, “Oooouu~!!! Perfect~!”

Suddenly, his cellphone rings a pop tune, and he looks to see it’s Morgana calling. He answers the phone and puts it on speaker, and he says, “Hello, Morgana.”

*“Hello, Master Nasir. I hope I’m not-”*

“Whatever it is that Aidoneus is wanting, it’s going to have to wait. I’m about to attend another fashion show, and I heard how someone is going to try to snipe one of our top Muses, and I *have* to see how it’s all played out~.”

*“Oh, my apologies for interrupting you, Master. I’m just calling to let you know that whenever you get the chance, you need to come to Lord Aidoneus’ place for a meeting.”*

“Hm... not interested.”

*“... The other Quphantos will be there... including Kal. We need your input for an event that Lord Aidoneus is-”*

“I’m sorry, did you just say *Kal* will be there?”

*“Y-Yes sir...”*

“...I’ll be there.”

*“Very good, sir-”*

*Boop!* Nasir immediately hangs up, and immediately calls one of his assistants. “Hello?” he says calmly, “Yes, take my palanquin to be cleaned, polished, glossed, the works!! Have the bearers wear silver attire, and if one of them dares try to stand out even more than me... slit their

throat and hire a replacement on the spot. And could you *PLEASE* bring someone to fix up my feathers!? They are my most important asset!!” He immediately hangs up and goes back to his mirror, making sure everything is how it’s supposed to be, from patting his hair to stroking his dark green goatee. “That damn Kal,” Nasir mutters, “He thinks he’s going to steal the show again, well wait until he sees what I have in store~! Kykykykykykyky~!!”

## Chapter 13

July 2017

Evening

While Jacqueline attends her family dinner, Nermal hums a peaceful tune as she eats her double-cheeseburger and sips her Avalanche Dew at Burger Queen. She grabs a napkin and pulls out a pen from her purse. She hears her phone vibrate from the many messages in the group chat, but she decides to ignore them for now, knowing that they're most likely talking about Jacqueline. She taps her pen at a mid-slow pace. *Tap tap. Tap tap. Tap tap.* She continues her humming as she looks at her blank, white napkin. *Tap tap. Tap tap. Tap tap. Tap tap.* Suddenly, random words begin to pop in her head like air bubbles in the sea. See. Sea. Me. Seaweed. Bubbles. Troubles. Love. Above. Nermal writes these words on her napkin, trying to create something she hasn't been able to for a couple weeks because of current events. Her heart beats at a steady beat of its own as she surrounds herself with melodic vibes and creates a harmonious atmosphere.

She tries to think of more words to add to her word bank. *Tap tap. Tap tap. Tap tap. Tap tap.* River. Shiver. Wave. Cave. Desire. Fire. Trap. Snap. Suddenly, "Ooouu~!" The outburst makes Nermal jump and let out a squeak which makes the person do the same while he's holding a tray of chicken fries and milkshakes.

Nermal takes a second to check out the guy that was looking at her writing, and she figures out that it's Kendo. "Kendo?" she asks, "What are you doing here?"

"Why, I'm just living life~!" Kendo answers cheerfully, and he sits across from her. "I was with a friend of mine, but he decided to go solo after a while."

"Ooh," Nermal says, "Well... What is your friend doing?"

"He's having an identity crisis, to put it bluntly," Kendo answers with the same tone.

"That's terrible!" Nermal says, worried, "Why are you here?! You should be helping him!"

“Cutie, what can I do? He won’t even take a simple ‘Hey, it’ll be okay’ or a ‘Don’t worry’.  
Plus, he already decided that he’s going to kidnap Amy first and *then* take care of the whole  
‘Figuring his Past Life’ bullshit afterwards.”

“Wait a minute... You’re talking about Pierre!?”

“Shhhhhhhh! Yes, I’m talking about the red-velvet asshole.”

Nermal tries to calm down after hearing that Pierre is still around town. So she whispers, “*But I thought we fought for you and Amy’s freedom!?*”

Kendo eats his milkshake-dipped chicken fry and muffles out, “Oof~!... Yeeeah about that.”  
He swallows his food and whispers, “*Last time I checked, there was never necessarily a deal made before you all fought. You all just simply.... Fought~ It was never said that Cerberus and Pierre HAD to go back to Umu or that they couldn’t attempt again~*”

“...Oh no...” Nermal says softly, looking down at her napkin.

“Hey, don’t worry,” Kendo reassures Nermal, dipping his chicken fry in his milkshake.

“When Cerberus comes back around, I’ll make sure that I’m out of your friends’ hair.”

“So you would just go running away, again?” Nermal asks, looking at Kendo’s playful face.

“Mhm~! It’s what I’ve been doing~!” Kendo responds, seeing the concern in Nermal’s face,  
but he continues eating.

“How long have you been doing this??” Nermal asks.

“A long time~!”

“Aren’t you tired of running...?”

“...Seems like I have to... What other choice do I have...?”

“...” Nermal continues looking at Kendo, seeing his smile still apparent, but there’s now a hint  
of sadness that shines through his eyes despite him not looking at her directly.

“...Anyway, what are *your* friends doing~?” Kendo asks her, wanting to change the subject.

“O-Oh, well, I honestly don’t know what we’re all doing,” Nermal answers, looking down at her napkin with desolation. “We’ve just... been trying to bounce back after what happened, but it just seems we’re only getting into more trouble...”

“Aah, trying to return to your normal lives, huh?” Kendo says, looking at his chicken fry.

“*Trying...*” Suddenly, *bzzt! Bzzt! Bzzt!* Nermal and Kendo look to see Nermal’s phone vibrate once more, and she lets out a sigh. Instead of checking the messages that she’s missed thus far, she goes back to writing on her napkin. peoni. Freedom. Decision. Precision. Fish. Wish.

“You’re not going to talk to them??” Kendo asks, tilting his head while eating.

“I already know they’re talking about Jacqueline and her parents,” Nermal immediately says, not stopping her hand from writing. Prayers. Answers.

Kendo keeps watching Nermal write but is immediately distracted by her phone’s vibrations. His feet begin tapping, and he begins hitting his chicken fry against his tray like a drumstick. *Tap-tap-tap-tap! Tap-tap-tappity-tap! Tap-tap-tap-tap! Tap-tap-tappity tap!* Nermal’s eyes begin squinting as if she’s losing focus, and gently slams her pen down and looks straight at Kendo, forcing him to stop what he’s doing. She clears her throat and gently says, “Could you... please stop doing that? I-It’s not helping...”

“Oh! Sorry, sorry~!” Kendo waves his hands apologetically, “It’s just that I’m so curious of what you are doing and what your friends are saying~!”

“Oh...” Nermal gently says, and she looks at her phone. She grabs it, unlocks it, and slides it over to Kendo. “Here you go,” she says, and she goes back to her writing, but sees she’s running out of room, so she grabs a new napkin. She goes back to writing. Hair. Care. Flair. Spare.



Kendo's eyes slightly widen from Nermal's trust in him with her phone. He takes her phone and looks through the group chat only.

**Jacqueline:** *Well... it's starting... I don't know what y'all are doing, but just pray for me. We haven't started talking yet, but I can tell this is about to be a bumpy ride... 🙄*

**Tenacity:** *It'll be okay, Jackie. I ain't never really met your folks, but judging how they've always let you do what you wanted to, I'm sure they're only going to act seriously about your career path and then totally forget about it the moment college starts.*

**Melissa:** *I don't know, if her dad was able to pull out \$300 from her account just for not telling them about our "camping trip", there's no telling what he'll do next. Just hang in there, Jackie.*

**Tenacity:** *If he does end up doing something drastic, I'll be shocked.*

**Melissa:** *What do you think he'll do next? Force her to stay at home while attending classes online?*

**Tenacity:** *God, that sounds like the perfect torture for Jackie. I was thinking he'd let her live on campus, but she would have to have a bodyguard pretty much watching over her the whole time.*

**Melissa:** *Eeewww, that's just as bad!! 🙄🙄*

**Tenacity:** *Oh yeah, did NeeNee tell you about that "tournament/sparring" thing we have planned?*

**Melissa:** *Yeah, but there's a high chance I won't be able to come, unless you guys could find a way to bail me out of here.*

**Tenacity:** *Don't worry, we'll think of something. Meanwhile, I'm over here with Sleeping Beauty still. 🙄*

**Melissa:** *Rose??*

**Tenacity:** *Yeah...guess it's safe to say she's spending the night here, unless her folks really need her back home.*

**Melissa:** *Well, her dad has those bats, so 🙌*

**Tenacity:** *You right.*

“What are they talking about?” Nermal asks, her eyes still glued onto her napkin.

Kendo looks at Nermal, then looks back at the phone. His thumbs hover over the keyboard, but his brain begs him not to text anything. He says playfully, “Oh nothing really~! It seems like Jackie is struggling with eating with her dad. Rose is at Tenacity’s place for some interesting reason. And you guys are having a tournament~?”

“It’s just to have fun and work on getting stronger,” Nermal explains. “Jacqueline and her dad had always been at each other’s necks, ever since highschool. And then Rose found out some things about her dad. And then MeeMee’s dad is pretty much watching her like a hawk now.”

“Wow...So the D.I.L.F’s have gone wild, huh?” Kendo says, continuing to watch the group chat.

**Melissa:** *So did anything else happen??*

**Tenacity:** *Besides Rose and her dad and Jacqueline with hers, nah. Nermal is at Burger Queen. 🍔*

**Melissa:** *By herself? 😬*

**Tenacity:** *Yeah...She didn't want to attend the family dinner.*

**Melissa:** *Well, I hope she's okay. It's too dangerous for her to be by herself 😬...even though that's what I'M needing right now, too 😬*

**Tenacity:** *It says she's seeing our text. NeeNee, you okay?? 😬*

**Melissa:** 🙄

Kendo's heart races and his ears begin pounding as he feels two sets of eyes staring at him, although there's only Nermal, and her eyes are stuck on her project. He looks at you, the reader, acknowledging that he's been given two clear options. He can either give the phone back to Nermal, leaving her friends on 'read', or he can text them back, pretending to be Nermal. He looks at Nermal once again, not wanting to disturb her focus. So he looks back at you, the reader, and cracks a sinister smile. He looks at the phone screen, and his thumbs begin typing at lightning speed.

**Nermal:** *Yeah, I'm okay~! 💕 Just writing right now~! 😊*

**Tenacity:** *Oh really? 🙄*

**Nermal:** *Yep~! It's nothing too extraordinary. Just a song to sum up all that's been going on with us... 😏*

**Melissa:** *Hey can you sneak a diss towards my dad? 😏 Just a quick, discrete one!*

**Nermal:** *I can try~! 😊 Honestly, if I'm gonna do that, I might as well diss Jackie's and Rose's, too~! Better yet, let's throw Kendo's in there too~!*

**Tenacity:** *I think you better save those ideas for another song, then, because uuuh 💀*

**Melissa:** *Yeah, talking about Kendo's dad alone would take three tracks... maybe four 💀*

**Nermal:** *Or maybe 666 tracks 😊*

**Melissa:** 💀💀💀

**Nermal:** *But for reals-y, I don't know how this song is gonna turn out, but when I complete it, I'm going to perform it at the cafe!*

**Melissa:** *WHOA WHOA HUH!? 😱*

**Nermal:** *And at our school's talent show~!! 😊*

**Tenacity:** *Whaaat!?* 🤔 *Our baby is going from singing quietly by herself to singing to the entire school and then some!?* 😭

**Melissa:** *She's growing up on us* 🤔😭💕💕

As soon as Kendo prepares the next message, a reggae tune starts playing on Nermal's phone, making Kendo's and Nermal's heart skip a beat. Kendo looks to see that it's Jacqueline calling the group chat. Not asking for Nermal's permission, Kendo gets up from his seat, walks to the exit and says to Nermal, "Don't worry, I'll take care of it~!"

Nermal says, "Oh...B-But Kendo~"

"Continue writing your song~! I got this~!" Kendo interrupts the worried Samaka, and he answers the phone saying, "Helloooooo~?" After saying that, he exits the restaurant, leaving Nermal by herself once again.

*How did he know I was trying to write a song?* Nermal asks herself. Taking a deep breath as if she's emerging from the water for air, she looks at the words she's written on the two napkins. See. Sea. Me. Seaweed. Bubbles. Troubles. Love. Above. River. Shiver. Wave. Cave. Desire. Fire. Trap. Snap. peoni. Freedom. Decision. Precision. Fish. Wish. Prayers. Answers. Hair. Care. Flair. Spare. She taps her pen again to revive the beat she originally had. *Tap tap. Tap tap. Tap tap. Tap tap.* She then hums softly, trying to find the perfect melody while also finding the right words to use from her word-bank. She digs through her memories of her old home and of what's happening now. From her friends learning about who she is, to her friends gaining powers, to her friends fighting peonis, to herself just in the background witnessing it all. Her body becomes an anchor, not wanting to move or continue the beat. Immediately, she closes her eyes and quietly sings out:

*Am I just a simple fish in the sea,*

*Without a purpose, is this easy life for me?*

*And if so, why do I feel this desire,*

*To throw myself into the battlefield of fire?*

Nermal gasps at what she just sung out, pondering what her heart just sung out. She quickly writes down her lyrics on a third napkin, then Kendo storms back inside the restaurant and bolts straight to her. “Hey!” Kendo says, making Nermal jolt. “We need to go to the creamery, like now.”

“Huh?” Nermal squeaks out. “Why? What’s going on-”

“Jacqueline left her house and is bawling her eyes out.”

## Chapter 14

July 2017

Evening

Shandon, still in the clothes he's been wearing all day, and Zeena, now in a white satin kimono, lay in the sturdy, queen-sized brown and white hotel bed, eating chinese food. Cocoa lays down on the floor in front of the bed, sleeping peacefully through the comedic sitcom that her parents are watching. Zeena looks at her sesame chicken, contemplating if she should stomach anymore after what has happened today. She just can't seem to forget how her husband acted towards their niece and friends. She looks at her now diluted husband, Shandon, watching him slurp up his noodles and munch on an egg roll, seeing how he used his Upendelaiki and Quphanto abilities to heal the cuts and bruises he received from Usiku earlier. A fire grows stronger inside Zeena the more she sits in the grungy room with its dimmed lights and small space, wondering if Shandon feels any regret for the words he has said.

Shandon feels Zeena's harsh stare and muffles out, "What's wrong now?"

"I told you to not drink this mornin', Pooh," Zeena says.

Shandon rolls his eyes and snaps back, "And I told you that I didn't want to see that jungle fiend fo' another couple of months, Suga. I *had* to get my drink in."

"You didn't have to go with me, Shandon," Zeena shoots back.

"I thought it was gon' be like every other visit, baby, damn! You visit Delilah, I sit around and wait, I shoot a few petty remarks towards Usiku, we leave. The moment I overheard Lil' Honey's convo wit' that hobo, it was over wit'. I ain't my pops! I can't see the future!"

"You've *been* wantin' to do that shit, and you know it."

"Ya' damn right I did!! I just didn't think it'd be today! You can always count yo' drunk counterpart to do the work fo' you!"

"And you don't feel bad, at all, huh?"

“*Hell* nah!! I meant what I said, and I said what I meant!!”

“*Scoffs* Okay.” Zeena immediately gets up, places her food on the table, and walks to the mini refrigerator.

Shandon watches her, his eyes glued to her butt, and says, “Baby, if you askin’ me to be sorry for what I did, I got bad news for you. I’m not sorry.” Zeena doesn’t respond, but the atmosphere around her becomes petrifying for Shandon, and he immediately figures out a way to decorate his words. He quickly says, “Okay, I’m sorry for upsetting Rose and Delilah. I was tryna’ throw punches at Usiku, but y’all were in the middle of it all.”

“Don’t leave out the detail that you pointed your weapon at Usiku, scaring our niece, jackass!!” Zeena blurts out, turning to face him.

Shandon says back, “It was just to prove how far Usiku would go-!”

“I DON’T FUCKING CARE!! YOU DONE TRAUMATIZED THAT GIRL!”

“.... Look, I’ll call them to apologize. I ain’t gonna lie, I feel bad about Delilah getting hurt in the process, and now that you brought it up...hurting Rose wasn’t in my plans, either. But am I gonna apologize to Usiku? Hell no. Rose deserved to hear the truth, and you *cannot* tell me that you didn’t think that Usiku was gonna wait until he was bedridden to finally admit to his actions.” The Malaiki-human hybrid refuses to say anything else to her delusional husband, letting the television fill in the silence. She goes back to the mini fridge. “Oh, come on, baby, don’t be mad at me~” he whines as he gets onto the edge of the bed and leans to smack Zeena’s butt. *Smack!* Zeena lets out a yelp, waking up Cocoa, and she immediately leaves the refrigerator holding a cold water bottle. Noticing that it’s just the couple talking, Cocoa lets out a yawn and rests her head. Zeena looks at Shandon with an annoyed face, but Shandon gives her a wide smile, showing off his gap.

Zeena, as she opens her water bottle, says, “So Imma need you to call Delilah and Rose and tell them you are sorry before tomorrow.”

“I will, baby, I will,” Shandon groans out as he stumbles out of bed and cuddles his wife from behind while she drinks her water.

“*And* you need to talk to Usiku,” Zeena hisses out, trying to recover from her brain freezing over from the cold water.

“Nope. Not doing it,” the Quphanto/Upendelaiki hybrid retorts, stepping away from Zeena and laying back down.

“And why not?”

“What is there to talk about?”

The determined Malaiki-human hybrid lets out a sigh of vexation, and she rests her water on the table and cuddles with Shandon, tugging at his chest hairs to calm herself down, though the idea of ripping out a few provokes her. “Be honest,” she says, “... You say that you forgive Usiku for what happened back then...but you know you don’t...”

Shandon’s lips stay sealed, not wanting to talk about one of the most tragic events of his life. He huffs and puffs, trying to find the right words, but his thinking train just fails him. So he summons a joint filled with his signature product he named Malaiki’s Cabbage(which is a strain of weed Shandon creates using his Quphanto and nature powers combined), its green, blue, purple, and gold colors shimmer against the lamp light. He lights up the joint and inhales the harsh yet soothing fumes, letting the drug take over his lungs and brain instantly. He breathes out, letting the smoke push away the peonis that are trying to mess with him. He coughs a little, but with a raspy voice, he murmurs out, “I tried... I know I shouldn’t be worried about what Usiku does with his life...Hell, if anything, I probably should be grateful for him...If it weren’t



for him, I'd be stuck in that damn gang...never getting the chance to see you...and marry you...and have Cocoa..."

Zeena gently takes the joint away from him and takes a puff herself, putting herself in the same spell Shandon is under, coughing softly. Shandon continues, "But the fact that he got away with all of those deaths... Zeena, you didn't see *all* those people he killed before AND after he got rid of the gang."

"*I know...*" Zeena whispers back, handing the joint back to Shandon.

"And you know what? Sure, I should be happy with where I am and just leave Usiku and his baggage alone." *Inhale.....Exhale.* "But the possibility of Rose's world shattering after she learns of her father's choices after so many years just doesn't sit right with me...Not to mention how this man is still running free and not facing *any* type of jail time." Pass.

*Inhale.....Exhale.* "Well, to be fair, Usiku's been a good boy ever since he and Delilah moved down here...excluding *that* incident. But...Pooh, some things we just shouldn't mess with... if Usiku was going to take forever with opening up to his daughter, then fine, that's on him. It's not *my* place or *your* place to tell *his* daughter what *he* did." Pass.

*Inhale.....Exhale.* "But, baby, *I* didn't know anything about Usiku or his sisters or *anything* except that Uncle Mwezi was walking trash. It was until Usiku came to town that they revealed everything, and I was 19 at the time! What's happenin' to Rose is just a repeat of what happened to me." Pass.

"So if it weren't for Usiku comin' around, yo' folks wouldn't have told the whole story. They were willing to talk shit about your uncle... but weren't ready to talk about anything else... hoping that maybe that was all you needed to know."

"..."

“Hm. Interesting.” *Inhale.....Exhale.*

“I would like to believe that my folks *would* have said something, they just didn’t know-”

“When was the best time?”

“...”

“Mm. Interesting.”

“Zeena, what you tryna say?”

“Ain’t you mad at ya’ folks for waiting *oh so* long to tell *you* about *your* family history and who *they* really were?”

“Baby, I *been* over that! And that’s exactly my point! I don’t want Rose to go through that whole family exposition bullshit the way I did.”

“But your folks didn’t have someone come around to steal their thunder, huh?”

“.....”

“And then it astonishes me...How you for real used that Frankie incident against him...like *you* never killed someone to protect the one you love...”

“Maaan, gimme my shit!!”

“Nah!! Face the truth!!”

Shandon pounces on Zeena, trying to grab his joint back, but Zeena plants her foot on his stomach and pushes him back. She puts her hand in the air, keeping her straight face as she makes Shandon have to reach for it while worrying about her foot keeping him away. “Aye, man!!” Shandon shouts out, “You gon’ get the ashes all over the place! Quit playin’!”

“You gon’ have to earn yo’ joint back, mister,” Zeena says.

Shandon starts whining, “C’mon, Suga-”

“That’s *Mistress* Suga, to you~” Zeena purrs out. *Inhale.... Exhale.*

“You really ‘bout to do this?” Shandon whines some more.

“You’ve been a naughty, naughty boy... and it seems I’m gonna have to punish you the only way I can...”

“...Cocoa, baby, go to the balcony,” Shandon adjusts his voice to not disturb Cocoa as he gets up and gently shakes her to make sure she’s okay. Cocoa sits up, and Shandon leads her to the balcony. He slightly opens the window, letting the evening breeze enter the warm and stuffy room, and Cocoa prances outside and lays down on the cool, concrete balcony, her tail swaying happily. “Mommy and Daddy will try not to be too loud, okay?” Shandon says, softly smiling. “And I know I said ‘sorry’ earlier... but you know I mean it when I said I was sorry, right?” Cocoa immediately looks at Shandon, her dark-brown eyes sparkling and her mouth curved as if she’s smiling back at him. “Alrighty, I’ll leave you alone then,” Shandon responds and goes back inside and softly slides the window to where it’s ajar, and he notices the T.V. is off and Zeena sitting on the edge of the bed, her back erect, her white kimono revealing her shoulders, and the joint resting in her fingers.

“Get on your knees and beg,” Zeena growls out, keeping her straight face as she continues smoking the joint and summoning a paddle made of light.

“Maaayne, for a *joint*?” Shandon whines.

“Yep, you want it back, don’t you~?” Zeena replies, crossing her legs. Shandon lets out a sigh, and starts walking to Zeena, but she says, “Aht aht! *Crawl* to me. My goodness, does Pooh Bear need a reminder of the rules?”

Shandon gets on all fours and starts crawling towards his voluptuous mistress and says softly, “No, Mistress Suga~”

“Good~ Now start begging before I stuff your mouth with my toes.”

“*Tsk Maaan*, you wouldn’t do that~”

“Go ahead, keep talking back to me.”

“Nah, go ahead and do it-”

*Riiiiiiiiiiiiing! Riiiiiiiiiiiiing!* Shandon’s phone begins ringing, interrupting the couple’s bonding time. Shandon gets up to answer the phone and says, “Hello?”

“*Son... Warn Rose that she and her friends are in trouble...*”

“Huh?” Shandon says, squinting his eyes, sitting next to Zeena, and Zeena, concerned, makes her light-paddle disappear and wraps her arm around Shandon and leans against him to hear the conversation. “Pops, what you talkin’ ‘bout,” he says, confused.

“*A powerful force is going to enter this realm... and take someone very dear to Rose...*”

“Pops, I don’t know who you could be talkin’ ‘bout...”

*“I saw six butterfly koi fish... one of them were trying to befriend an eel...but then a hand submerged into the water and snatched away the friendly butterfly koi fish along with another from within the group, leaving the four fish and the eel trying to get the two fish back, but they are left in despair for they are trapped within the sea realm...that’s what was shown to me when I asked the flames about Rose...”*

“...*mutters* Whatever that means... Aight...I’ll tell Rose, but...”

“*And Shandon...*”

“Hm...?”

“*The longer you hold someone’s past in the present... the less time you **both** will have to create a better future together...let...it...go...*”

“.....”

“*I love you, son...Have a blessed day.*”

## Chapter 15

50 years ago

“I heard about Cerberus having to grab you from Gaia... again...”

“Yep, and I’m planning to leave again, soon~”

“But why? What’s so special about Gaia...?”

“A lot of things~! The food, the humans, the cities, the nature, the drama~! Everything on Gaia Is just so luscious~! And the chaos that humans cause there is just so entertaining, more entertaining than here~!”

“Well, as long as you keep your distance, I guess...”

“Oh, no no, Morgue. I *interact* with humans~!”

“What!?”

“Why do you think Pops keeps sending Cerberus after me?”

“I thought it was just because you were going to Gaia without informing your father!”

“No... I... I’m sorry, I should have told you what was really going on during my trips...”

“...So tell me...”

“...I enjoy bonding with humans as unstable as they are~ They can be good one minute, and they can be bad the next~! They even try to put labels onto each other when in reality they’re all the same~! Hahahahahaha~! It’s so tragic~! It’s so comedic~! It’s so... *delicious*~”

“...In other words, you would rather be around humans than me...”

“Morgue, don’t word it like that. If you weren’t here, I’d dread every time Cerberus captured me.”

“Shouldn’t I be enough reason for you to stay here!?”

“...You know, a couple of humans I slept with pretty much asked the same thing, and after about 650 years, I *still* don’t get it. What is up with everyone I sleep with trying to keep me in one spot, man?”

“...”

“That’s a genuine question! Some will say it’s because they love me, but it’s like...what’s love, honestly? We talk, we have sex, and then boom, that’s it. We stay as friends and just satisfy each other’s needs whenever. Why strings gotta be attached? Is it not possible to just...I dunno, fuck and go, I guess?”

“...”

“Morgana? Do you...Do you love me?”

“...No...No I don’t...I only lust for you...”

“Phew! See, I knew you’d get it~! Maybe humans have a hard time distinguishing the difference between lust and whatever love is. I lust for you too, Morgue-y~ I may have an obsession over humans, but you’re the only peoni I have eyes for~”

“...Anti..”

“Oh, uh, Morgue?”

“Yes?”

“Can you not call me Anti? Call me... Kendo~!”

“Why ‘Kendo’?”

“Well, this last visit, I was in Japan again, and for once, I actually read some books~! I read one where it was talking about this form of martial arts called kendo, and it’s basically when people fight with bamboo swords. I found it cool because you’re not killing your opponent, but instead you’re just hurting them really bad. I’d like to think that I’m the bamboo sword. It seems

like every human I interact with seems to get hurt somehow....whether it be because of my nature or because of Cerberus abruptly taking me away... however, I'd like think that I'm not the reason for their deaths...Plus, the word 'kendo' just sounds super cool to me~!"

"Oh....Okay...Kendo..."

"Anyway, you wanna put in one more round before the boss man calls for you again~?"

"....No...I'm...good actually. I have some documents I have to organize...I'll talk to you later...."

"Oh....Alrighty then...."

...

### **Present**

Morgana lays in the white bed for a little while longer, thinking about the time Kendo told her his new name. That conversation wasn't the first time Kendo talked about humans to Morgana; however, the more he talked about his earthly adventures, the less she began to care and the more her heart sank. They only got to spend so much time before Aidoneus would need Morgana for something, and all Kendo chose to do with her was have relations and talk about humans. The past conversation burns her eyes, causing loud whimpers to escape from her mouth. She takes deep breaths as if she had done a marathon, and she grips onto one of the white pillows, imagining that it was Kendo's neck she was wringing out. She bursts out of the bed, and lets out a shrilling scream as she zooms to the walls and begins ripping the pictures off. The tears blur Morgana's vision, but she has a clear sight of the humans that Kendo has been around for the past 700 years. Her long nails shred the pictures to a million pieces covering the black carpet like confetti. She goes around the room, making sure that every picture is ripped and torn to the point that Kendo can't depict the printed memory. For a quick second, her head turns to the bronze long mirror, and she sees herself; eyes like green glass marbles, face becoming the color of a

cherry, and her dark-red kinky hair going everywhere like flames. Seeing her wide waist and chunky arms only increases the heat, and she storms towards the mirror and knocks it over. *SLAM! CRACK!!* The sound of the mirror falling on its side and shattering into small different geometric shapes echo through the room. She turns around and stomps to another place in the room, looking for whatever else she can break or tear, but her foot locks lips with the corner of the bed which sends a sharp pain all over her body. She falls to the tainted floor, screaming and crying as she deals with the pain that's residing in her foot and her heart.

“DAMMIT KENDO!!!” Morgana shouts out, “WHY DID YOU HAVE TO BECOME SO CURIOUS ABOUT THAT DAMN REALM!?” She says no more, as tears rush out of her red and puffy eyes, snot flows down her nose, and saliva runs down her quivering mouth. *I don't understand*, Morgana thinks to herself, *Am I in love with you, Kendo? I kept telling you that I lust for you, but now I'm not so sure... I don't know if I'm mad because you're not here with me...or because I'm not there with you. Those humans get to have so much time with you now...much more time than I ever could...Someone please help me...* The thoughts flood in and carry Morgana away from shore, no one here to rescue her.

She lays on the floor, sobbing. Suddenly, *ring ring ring ring ring ring ring!!* Her phone's voice fills the room as it sings to Morgana, letting her know that someone is calling her. Morgana, still whimpering, struggles getting up, losing her balance, but she succeeds and limps to the bed. She lays on the bed on her stomach as she looks at the phone to see that it's Aidoneus calling her. There were times when she ignored his calls, but it was because Kendo would tell her to so that they're not interrupted. However, for once, she's ignoring her boss on her own terms. Just this one time, she pleads to not think about work. For once, she begs to just lay in this bed full of sweet and amorous memories as she tries to sort out these unknown emotions.



The phone stops ringing, and notifies Morgana that Aidoneus left a voice message several seconds later. She unlocks her phone, goes to her voicemail box, and listens to the message.

**Aidoneus:** *Morgana? Is everything okay? Usually when you're not answering, it's because you're occupied with my son~ However, unless Anti came back home with no one telling me, you're not with him right now, are you? Well either way, I know you'll return my call soon. I was just checking in, wondering how the invites are coming along. Call me soon, my dear. I appreciate you~*

Instantly, Morgana remembers that she has to now contact the fifth friend, and the way to contact her is very unorthodox. Morgana groans at the thought of what she has to do, yanking one of the plush pillows and cuddling them, imagining that she was in Kendo's embrace once again, despite being frustrated with him. She goes through Kendo's only drawer and grabs one of his shirts, and she uses it to clean up her face as best as she can. She fixes her hair, puts her glasses and shoes back on, and walks out of the destroyed room, making sure to lock the door. She walks back to her office, goes to a cabinet filled with black balloons ready to be filled. She grabs one, opens her office window, and she begins blowing into the balloon, watching it expand to the point that even a simple poke could pop it. She ties it up, holds it gently with both hands, and closes her eyes as she whispers her message. She then lets the ominous balloon float through the air, traveling to its destination.

...

The Sloth District, a place in Umu where there's either lots of partying or lots of sleeping. The seven moons have a vibrant light-cerulean-blue glow, coloring the district the color of sloth. The district is split into two counties: Kumbaya county and Sandy county. Kumbaya county, the closest to the entrance of the district, consists of all of the nightclubs, bars, and entertainment

centers. The lively music along with the energetic peonies creates a lively and hyperactive atmosphere. Tour carriages ride through the dusty trails, the plush, light-blue sands dancing through the air as the horses tread through it. The tour guide grabs their megaphone and says, “Welcome to the Sloth District~! Have work, but don’t want to think about it, let alone get it done? Come here for a very good time! The question is *how* do you want to distract yourself? Do you want to just lay around and catch some Z’s? Perhaps dancing to some rave music while under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs sounds more appealing to you~! Well, the Sloth Quphanto, Ophelia, made sure that she had the best of both worlds just for you~! Once you enter the district, you are in Kumbaya county, the county perfect for the party-goers~! Dancing, Karaoke, Arcades, Bars, with all of this, you’ll be partying like an irresponsible human going to college~! Be careful of intoxicated peonies, though. You wouldn’t want to step in their vomit puddles!” The newcomer-peonies notice how electronic billboards advertise the various DJ’s, bands, and singers that are performing at the different nightclubs. The tour guide continues, “Ophelia doesn’t give her followers a specific name or title, but she does tend to call everyone ‘fellow sloths’ every now and then~! Believe it or not, she doesn’t want her followers to see her as a Quphanto hence the ‘fellow’ in ‘fellow sloths’. She wants to maintain a connection with you, so you should feel super special~!”

The tour carriages walk through the rambunctious county, and they enter the second half of the district, the sounds of jamboree drown into the serene sounds of wind chimes ringing and harps playing throughout the Sandy county. Barely any peonies are walking around. The peonies that can be seen are dragging their bare feet across the pillow-like sand, wearing their nightgowns and onesies and carrying their pillows and life-sized plushies. The newcomer-peonies notice how some of the drowsy peonies sleep on the sandy ground, snoring away their cares. The





## Chapter 16

July 2017

Evening

Pierre makes it to Applebuzz, the restaurant that he and Alexander ate at before. As he waits for a waitress to sit him down, the mysterious memories continue floating around in his mind like sheets of plastic covering an ocean. He grips *The Reaper's Contract* tightly in hopes that perhaps having the book close to him will keep the valuable fragments of his Past Life alive. Even though he has improved in controlling himself and not breaking down from the memories' impact, the Upindeoni still takes occasional deep breaths the moment excitement makes an appearance.

One waitress comes around and sees Pierre, and she says, "Is it just you this evening, sir?"

"Yes," Pierre answers, "And is it possible if I can request a waitress to serve me?"

"Oh?" the waitress tilts her head, "W-Well, we rarely get that type of request, but if the waitress you want is working right now, we can make it happen~!"

"Perfect. I would like Melissa, please," he says with a calm but straightforward tone.

"Okay, let's sit you down, and I'll go grab her for you!" the waitress cheerfully says.

"Could you sit me somewhere that is...secluded from everyone else?"

"Oooh! Um... Sure thing? Is this like a date or something?"

"....." Pierre gives the waitress a sour look, biting his tongue to stop himself from saying something slick.

"Hehehe...Um...No worries! Melissa is super sweet. She's been having a rough time lately, so maybe this will help her!"

"Rough time...?"

"Yeah, like, you can tell she hasn't been able to be herself lately. She tells me it's because of her folks, but... I feel like there's something else, ya know?"

“Hm...”

“A-Anyway, this way, sir!”

The waitress stops running her mouth and finally leads Pierre to a seat that is at the back of the restaurant where there is no customer to be found. “Around this time is when the place starts slowing and becoming ‘dead’, so you came at the right time to make this happen,” the waitress says keeping her smile, but Pierre is not humored as he quietly sits himself down, placing *The Reaper’s Contract* on the right side of the table.

He looks at the waitress as she places his menu down gently, and with calm pink eyes and a faint smile, he says, “Water...please...”

“Right! Right away,” the waitress says, keeping her composure even though the vibes she receives from Pierre become more and more unbearable. “A-And I’ll also grab Melissa for you.”

“Thank you,” Pierre says, nodding softly, and the waitress immediately steps away. Not wanting to disturb the ominous peace, the waitress, on light feet, quickly walks toward Melissa.

Melissa cleans up an empty table, looking deep into the wood’s designs, letting her mind travel down so many paths that she could be taking right now. Her ride on the train-of-thought is interrupted when the waitress taps on her shoulder, and Melissa softly jumps. However, she calmly turns to look at her coworker and says, “Oh. Hey wassup?”

Not wasting any time, the waitress explains, “Hey, some guy wants you to be his waitress..”

“Hm? Who?” Melissa asks, standing up straight with concern plastered on her face. *Who would want me specifically?* Melissa asks herself.

“He’s over there...” the waitress points at Pierre, who is sitting diagonally across the restaurant, and the moment that Melissa sees the red-haired Upindeoni, *BA-BUMP!* Her heart loses its rhythm and memories of them battling it out in the forest begin playing. Her heart jumps

again when the waitress comes back with a glass of water in her hand. She hands it to Melissa and whispers, *“I’d be careful around him. He seems weird...”*

“Yeah, don’t worry, I got this,” Melissa says confidently, gripping the cup. She calmly walks to Pierre, but she doesn’t put on the smile she usually wears for her customers. Pierre hears her footsteps, and he turns to look at her. Seeing her brown hair in a messy yet neat bun, her emerald-green eyes shimmer when the restaurant’s dimmed lights hit them, and her calm facade as if she is just a simple human living her simple human life makes his hands itch and eye twitch. Melissa finally stands in front of Pierre, gently placing the cup of water in front of him. “Hey, stranger,” Melissa says.

“Don’t act like you don’t know me,” Pierre says in a low tone.

“Hm... *sighs* Gosh, I feel like I should know of you, buuuuut I don’t... Who are you again?” Melissa teases. She tries to contain her laughter, but she enjoys the playful feeling that builds up inside. The last time Pierre and her had a banter was when they first met. For her, it feels like it’s been forever. Right now, Pierre is the only person she doesn’t mind unleashing her mischievous sarcasm on.

“Very funny, Melissa...” Pierre says, rolling his eyes.

“I’m kidding. You’re Pierre, right? The guy that I whooped on~?”

“And the one you and your friend decided to kick in the face...”

“Yeah, you’ll have to forgive us. But lemme just say I didn’t want her to do that to you since I know her kicks probably burned.”

“I don’t want your pity,” Pierre growls out, squeezing his hands together underneath the table, trying to control himself from summoning a dark spear.

“No seriously,” Melissa says, taking a seat across from him, crossing her legs and resting her head on her soft hands as she softly gazes at Pierre and whimpers, “I don’t know how I would feel if she would have messed up that ugly face of yours~”

“W-What?” Pierre stutters. Frustrated, he looks out the window and says, “Whatever, look! You know why I’m here. Where’s Amethyst?”

“You’d think I’d tell you?” Melissa asks, pulling out her phone to check on her friends.

**Jacqueline:** *Well... it's starting... I don't know what y'all are doing, but just pray for me. We haven't started talking yet, but I can tell this is about to be a bumpy ride... 🙄*

**Tenacity:** *It'll be okay, Jackie. I ain't never really met your folks, but judging how they've always let you do what you wanted to, I'm sure they're only going to act seriously about your career path and then totally forget about it the moment college starts.*

**Melissa:** *I don't know, if her dad was able to pull out \$300 from her account just for not telling them about our "camping trip", there's no telling what he'll do next. Just hang in there, Jackie.*

**Tenacity:** *If he does end up doing something drastic, I'll be shocked.*

**Melissa:** *What do you think he'll do next? Force her to stay at home while attending classes online?*

“I don’t think you have a choice, honeybee,” Pierre sneers out, putting his eyes back on Melissa and squinting them.

*Ba-bump!* “Excuse me? Honeybee?” Melissa says, looking up from her phone with her face scrunched up in confusion, feeling blood slowly make it to her cheeks.

“Yeah, you remind me of a honeybee. I’ve encountered them a few times. They’re a pain in the ass to deal with...Just like how you are,” Pierre explains.



“Hm, well maybe you should learn how to better approach us,” Melissa snaps back, returning to her phone, painting a sassy expression on her face.

**Tenacity:** *God, that sounds like the perfect torture for Jackie. I was thinking he'd let her live on campus, but she would have to have a bodyguard pretty much watching over her the whole time.*

**Melissa:** *Eeewww, that's just as bad!! 🙅🏻🙄*

**Tenacity:** *Oh yeah, did NeeNee tell you about that “tournament/sparring” we have planned?*

**Melissa:** *Yeah, but there's a high chance I won't be able to come, unless you guys could find a way to bail me out of here.*

**Tenacity:** *Don't worry, we'll think of something. Meanwhile, I'm over with Sleeping Beauty still. 🧟*

**Melissa:** *Rose??*

**Tenacity:** *Yeah...guess it's safe to say she's spending the night here, unless her folks really need her back home.*

**Melissa:** *Well, her dad has those bats, so 🧛🏻*

**Tenacity:** *You right.*

“Alright, what do I have to do in order for you to tell me where she is?” Pierre asks, making Melissa look up from her phone once again.

“What?” Melissa asks back.

“Tell me what you want,” Pierre says again, trying to keep his composure. “If you're that type of person that I have to make a deal with in order for you to comply, then fine... Tell me what you want.”

Melissa thinks about what Pierre is saying, and she closes her eyes to really think about what she wants. Suddenly, she feels something take over her. It's not the air powers trying to come through, but it's a different kind of power. The ability to do as she pleases. No repercussions. No consequences. Pierre is letting Melissa have full control of the situation, knowing that Melissa could possibly have things go her way for as long as she wants. But is Pierre really going to keep his word? Is he going to follow suit and do what she says and not try to fight back? He is a peoni after all. But then she suddenly remembers that Nermal texted her about the sparring tournament Jacqueline is trying to have. Can she really include Pierre into the activity? Would participating in the first place cause her father to react negatively? Suddenly, an idea clicked in her head, an idea that can not only give her a chance to relax with the guy she's messing with but also a good excuse to give her parents. After careful thinking, Melissa puts on a smile and says, "Well...I'd love it if you participated in this little tournament my friends are having."

Pierre perks up, raising an eyebrow, and says, "Oh?"

"We haven't decided where this will take place, but...I'd like for us to go against each other again," Melissa says, looking into his eyes, "And if I win, you leave Amethyst alone, and everytime we see each other you have to address me as 'Queen Honeybee', since I'm such a *PaIN iN YoUr AsS.*"

"Excuse me-"

"And if *you* win, I'll have to give up Amethyst. But please understand, just because *I'll* back down doesn't mean that the *others* will. Deal?" Letting Pierre think about her offer, Melissa goes back to her phone.

**Melissa:** *So did anything else happen??*

**Tenacity:** Besides Rose and her dad and Jacqueline with hers, nah. Nermal is at Burger Queen. 🍔

**Melissa:** By herself? 😬

**Tenacity:** Yeah...She didn't want to attend the family dinner.

**Melissa:** Well, I hope she's okay. It's too dangerous for her to be by herself 😞...even though that's what I'M needing right now, too 😞

**Tenacity:** It says she's seeing our text. NeeNee, you okay?? 😞

**Melissa:** 🙄

**Nermal:** Yeah, I'm okay~! 💖 Just writing right now~! 😊

**Tenacity:** Oh really? 🙄

**Nermal:** Yep~! It's nothing too extraordinary. Just a song to sum up all that's been going on with us... 😞

**Melissa:** Hey can you sneak a diss towards my dad? 😬 Just a quick, discrete one!

**Nermal:** I can try~! 😊 Honestly, if I'm gonna do that, I might as well diss Jackie's and Rose's, too~! Better yet, let's throw Kendo's in there too~!

**Tenacity:** I think you better save those ideas for another song, then, because uuuh 🙄

**Melissa:** Yeah, talking about Kendo's dad alone would take three tracks... maybe four 🙄

**Nermal:** Or maybe 666 tracks 😊

**Melissa:** 🙄🙄🙄

**Nermal:** But for reals-y, I don't know how this song is gonna turn out, but when I complete it, I'm going to perform it at the cafe!

**Melissa:** WHOA WHOA HUH!? 😱

**Nermal:** And at our school's talent show~!! 😊

**Tenacity:** Whaaat!? 🤔 Our baby is going from singing quietly by herself or around us to singing to the entire school and then some!? 😭

**Melissa:** She's growing up on us 🤔😭💕💕

"Sighs Fine..." Pierre finally speaks, making Melissa look up once again. "I'll participate in that stupid tournament of yours, and *I will win*. I don't care what kind of bond you developed with that cat, and I don't give a damn that Alex is dating her. I need her so that I can go back home."

"...Hmhmhm~! Okay, if you say so," Melissa taunts Pierre again, causing him to growl softly.

"And don't think that you're going to have a chance at getting the upper hand, Melanie" Pierre says, the words flowing out smoothly with no hesitation, which makes Melissa's face scrunch up.

"...Melanie," Melissa squeaks out, "My name is *Melissa*, you ass!"

Pierre realizes what he just said, and his heart immediately starts running and his brain bursts into flames. His serious face dissipates into a timid face. "...W-What did I just call you?" Pierre stutters, his voice cracking a little. The interaction starts swirling his soul around, the same way that *The Reaper's Contract* did, and he swears that he can feel another torturous headache is about to make itself known.

Suddenly, Melissa's phone starts ringing. She looks to see that it's Jacqueline calling the group chat. "Hold on, let me take this real quick," Melissa says as she quickly gets up from her seat and takes a couple steps away from Pierre. She answers the phone and the first thing she hears is snuffles and whimpers coming from Jacqueline.

"Oh my god, Jackie!?" Melissa exclaims. "Are you okay?!"

“*M-M-M-M-MeeeMee!*” Jacqueline wails out.

“What’s going on!? Where are you!?” Melissa starts walking quickly to one of the ‘employees only’ rooms, and she puts the call on speaker as she puts in a PPTO(protected paid time off) request for the day on her job’s app.

“*I’m so fucking done, MeeMee!!*” Jacqueline whimpers out, “*Dad can honestly die of a heart attack for all I care!!*”

“Wait wait, what did he say!?” Melissa asks, waiting for the system to process her request.

But before Jacqueline could answer the question, a male voice chimes in, “*Helloooooo~?*”

The girls recognize the voice and Melissa says, “Wait a minute...Kendo??”

“*In the flesh~!*” Kendo confirms.

“So wait...that wasn’t *Nermal* texting me and Tenacity? That was *you!*?” Melissa exclaims.

Tenacity joins the call as soon as Melissa questions Kendo and she immediately growls out, “*Ayo, what the fuck are you doin’ wit’ Nermal’s phone?*”

“*Guys, I’m in the middle of a fucking breakdown, some love and attention would be nice!!*”

Jacqueline screams out.

“*I heard that a father around here was having a hard time loving their daughter,*” Kendo says in a smooth tone.

“*Kendo, tell Nermal that after today, she can have my room,*” Jacqueline declares through her trembling voice.

“*Whoa whoa, huuuh? But where are you going?*” Kendo asks.

“*I’m leaving this fucking hellhole!! I won’t need my things!! I’m just going to catch a bus and just get out of here!!*” Jacqueline cries out. “*If dad thinks that I’m such a waste of space then I’ll just get out of his hairs.*”

“No! No! We’re not doing this!” Melissa says trying to stop Jacqueline, and her phone gives a notification that the app accepted her PPTO and successfully clocked her out.

*“Jackie, take some deep breaths,”* Tenacity says, *“Let’s all just meet up at the creamery and talk about this. It should still be open. Kendo, I swear if you’ve done something to Nermal, I’m beating your ass.”*

*“Don’t worry, I would never hurt that cutie!”* Kendo reassures the feisty friend, *“We’ll be there faster than you can find a date~!”*

*“I’m sorry wha-”*

*“Byyyyye~!”* Kendo hangs up the phone, leaving just the human trio.

“Well, I’ll just meet y’all there. Jackie, I better see you, okay?” Melissa says, quickly leaving the call and speed-walking to Pierre. “Pierre, some things came up, and I gotta go.”

“Oh? I can’t come with you?” Pierre says, standing up with a face filled with concern, and he makes sure to grab *The Reaper’s Contract*.

“I dunno, this is a bestie emergency,” Melissa explains, “Then again, Kendo is coming along with Nermal, so...”

“Wait, Kendo is with one of your friends right now?” Pierre asks.

“Mhm...”

“Then you *have* to take me with you. Having that guy around anyone is automatically asking for some bullshit to happen.”

“...Alright..”

Not saying anything else, Pierre and Melissa walk to her car. She unlocks the door, and Pierre holds the door for her, and softly smiles at him as she enters her side of the car. Pierre gently closes the door and walks to the passenger side and lets himself inside the tessie, putting down

*The Reaper's Contract* on the car floor. Melissa starts the car and they drive off, trying to make it in time to help the distressed party girl.

## Chapter 17

July 2017

Evening

The five young ladies sit at a light blue leather booth in their favorite creamery while the two evil men sit at a round table next to them. Nermal and Melissa hug Jacqueline tightly, occasionally rubbing her back while she softly snuffles, while Rose and Tenacity sit on Melissa's side, joining in on the group hug. Pierre eats his vanilla gelato quietly, not trying to pry into the girls' business, but Kendo, eating his vanilla gelato with strawberry, mango, and kiwi chunks, watches the girls talk about what happened with Jacqueline and her father. He takes a bite of his gelato, savoring the sweet flavors dancing together, and he muffles out, "Honestly, fuck your dad." The girls look at Kendo as he swallows down his food. He looks at Jacqueline with seriousness and says, "My Pops may enjoy torturing me, keeping me in that *literal* hellhole for years on top of years, and not agree with my decisions, but at least he, *the devil himself*, actually loves the fact that he created me... *though for the wrong reasons*. How does a father, a *human*, wish for their own child to not be born?"

"For real," Tenacity agrees, not wanting to butt Kendo out of the conversation. "The dude can be mad all he wants about you partying and shit, but to talk shit about your birth? That's a VERY low blow."

"I swear," Kendo says, sitting on the edge of his seat, "You humans amaze me every time~ Here I am, thinking that my dad is the worst of the worst, only for you guys to prove me wrong. This isn't the first time I've heard or seen a parent disowning their child, but it's heartbreaking every time I witness it happen..."

"Her dad has always been cruel to her," Nermal jumps in, her face red and smoke coming out of her ears, "I had a feeling he would say something so terrible like that sooner or later...he was just holding back this entire time."



“And you said an Umrha saved you?” Melissa asks softly, her heart pounding at a furious pace. “His ungrateful ass doesn’t deserve you! How can he say that shit!? If it weren’t for the Umrha, WE wouldn’t have you here!”

“And I would still be in the ocean...all alone,” Nermal adds, sorrow present in her voice, tears slowly forming.

“So what are you going to do, then?” Pierre finally jumps in, and everyone looks at him. “It’s clear now that the person you live with is also the person that doesn’t want you around. What’s your move?”

Jacqueline stays silent for a minute, although that minute feels like a lifetime. As soon as she stormed out of the place she thought was home, she swore up and down that she would just leave the city entirely, abandoning the memories she’s made. However, being with her friends now warms her soul like a campfire in the middle of a forest on a chilly night. Unfortunately, she feels the sense of leaving behind even the only people that have always been in her corner still present. The broken-hearted partier clears her throat and says, “I don’t know what I’m about to do, now... But, like, I do know that I don’t want to see my dad or mom ever again.”

“Huh?” Nermal questions, “But mom is-”

“A bitch that loves riding dad’s dick,” Jacqueline interrupts.

“You don’t mean that!” Nermal exclaims.

“Let’s be honest, NeeNee, if dad didn’t say that last bit about my birth, my mom wouldn’t have switched to my side!!” Jacqueline yells out, “She always lets dad run the show, and it always pisses me off!!”

“Well, if we’re gonna get technical,” Tenacity jumps in, “Your mom is pretty much a victim, too. It’s like you said... your dad runs everything. I understand being frustrated with your mom, but if anyone deserves 100% the hate and shit-talking, it’s your dad.”

“She’s right,” Rose says softly, “Your dad shouldn’t have said such harsh words to you... That should never even be a thought to have... You are spontaneous, Jackie. You have your fun, you take risks, and you put yourself out there in ways that are empowering but worrisome. You make decisions that none of us have the guts to even consider, and that alone makes you special.”

“I didn’t ask for a recap of who I am, Rose,” Jacqueline says bluntly, startling everyone.

“O-Oh,” Rose stumbles on her words, “I-I know, but I was just-”

“Trying to help?” Jacqueline cuts in like a knife, “Well answer me this, then. How’s things with *your* dad, huh? How are *you* holding up, Ms. Perfect?”

“Whoa whoa, where’s this animosity comin’ from?” Tenacity asks, her face scrunching up.

“I’m over here dealing with a piece of shit of a dad who wishes I wasn’t alive right now, and *you’re* bitching over your overprotective ass dad not telling you shit that doesn’t really matter anymore?” Jacqueline snarls.

Gasps escape some of the group’s mouths, and a few people in the creamery overhear the conversation, looking in shock. Rose’s heart skips a beat, and she feels her mind go blank, but she immediately reconnects and stays calm to say, “You wouldn’t understand my situation, Jackie.”

“From what I’m seeing, it just looks like you’re finding an excuse to get mad at your dad for what happened between you and that guy you were seeing,” Jacqueline continues snapping. Some people start talking amongst themselves about the argument brewing.

“What the hell are you talking about!?” Rose exclaims, losing all of her calmness just from the mentioning of her past being thrown into the atmosphere. “I have always had these questions about my father, WAY before *he* came into the picture! And I’m guessing you forgot about my nightmares trying to tell me something as well!”

“It was none of your fucking business!! Your dad actually gives a fuck about you!! So what you don’t know shit about him! At least he LOVES you!!”

“Which is fine, but I don’t even know the man that gave me life let alone the rest of my family!! Do I even need to bring up how my uncle’s been acting!? Both of our families are practically strangers to us right now so why are you trying to antagonize me!?”

“You know what? You’re right. Let’s throw Melissa in here.”

Melissa’s eyes widen and jaw drops. “Excuse me?” she asks.

“Are you seriously getting mad at your dad for just being a dad?” Jacqueline looks at Melissa, squinting her eyes. “At least your dad isn’t like mine and doesn’t take money out of your account off of some petty bullshit.”

“Jackie, I don’t know what you are trying to do right now, but I’m not about to go back and forth with you, especially if it’s about my toxic ass dad,” Melissa says, not afraid to snap back at her icy friend. “I’m just frustrated that my dad wants me under his surveillance for such a long time. What’s going on between me and dad right now isn’t throwing me into a rollercoaster of a crisis.”

“Oh really? That’s crazy, I was over here thinking you were trying to keep yourself relevant,” Jacqueline retorts.

“Okay, you’re just saying bullshit now,” Melissa stands up, taking a few steps away from the booth.

“What’s wrong, Melissa? Too afraid that you’re gonna be in the background like you’ve always been?” Jacqueline whines sarcastically.

“No, but I’m afraid that in a millisecond, my fists will have a mind of their own,” Melissa snaps back. Pierre’s heart jumps seeing Melissa getting fired up, and his mind goes blank as he gets up to stand behind her and rest his hands on her shoulders. Melissa’s heart notices the notion and flutters up to her throat, but her eyes stay on Jacqueline.

Jacqueline immediately gets up from her seat and says, “What’s up, then?” With that being said, Nermal immediately stands up and stands between the infuriated cheetah and venomous viper. Tenacity and Rose stand up as well, staying close to Melissa. “You’re not the first broad I lay my hands on,” Jacqueline continues. People begin bringing out their phones and their whispers become loud waves of instigation and worry. Kendo wants to be part of the crowd, begging for the girls to break into a fight right here in this colorful place filled with sweet treats. However, he super glues his lips and begs his mind to stop producing such toxic thoughts.

“Jackie, stop it!!” Nermal yells, “Melissa is NEVER in the background!! That person would be ME!! And Rose is not Ms. Perfect!! I know that you’re mad at your dad, but we’re trying to help you!! Why are you doing this!?”

“Um...You guys are gonna have to get out,” the cashier says to the five ladies, “Y’all are causing a disturbance, and we’re gonna have to tell you to leave or the cops will.” With that being said, Jacqueline doesn’t waste a second and storms out of the creamery, the rest of the girls following her. Kendo and Pierre leave their gelatos behind and they follow the group.

They get away from the creamery and get to the bus stop. Jacqueline turns to look at her friends and says, “Honestly, fuck all of this! I’m going to take the next bus out of here. That way, none of y’all have to deal with me anymore.”

“Jackie, I think that dinner done made you lose a couple of screws,” Tenacity says as she walks towards her. “You need to gon’ ‘head and chill the fuck out and get back to your senses.”

“Oh I *definitely* don’t wanna hear it from you, Ms. ‘I come from a good home with good parents, so I DEFINITELY have my shit together’,” Jacqueline spits out, “You are THE LAST person I want to hear right now. I bet that even though Rose does all these sweet things and has a sense of leadership, you STILL think you’re better than her simply because your daddy keeps it real with you and you don’t have to experience the dreams Rose does, huh? You think you’re OH SO BLESSED AND HIGHLY FAVORED, don’t you, while we stand around here being your little subjects!!”

“No I don’t,” Tenacity bounces back, “But since we’re talkin’ shit, I’ll tell yo’ ass this-”

“No no no!!” Nermal yells again, “Guys please!? Can we please just...j-j-just...*sobs*...” Sniffles and whimpers escape Nermal’s lips, and the girls immediately stop to look at her.

“Oh my god,” Tenacity says, realizing the damage that’s been done. She, along with Rose and Melissa, hug Nermal tightly as the Samaka-human hybrid wails out her despair and desolation. Jacqueline, however, stands where she is, feeling a few tears burn her eyes. She then sees Pierre and Kendo witness the Samaka-human’s breakdown. Pierre folds his arms, keeping his mouth shut and his opinions silenced. Kendo, however, walks up to the girls, and he looks at Jacqueline with a blank face.

“Jacqueline,” Kendo begins, snatching her attention, “It’s not working. I know what you’re doing...and it’s not working.” Jacqueline stays silent, but her body jolts a little, and she begins blinking a little rapidly to get rid of the tears. “You’re trying to drive your friends away in the most fucked up way possible in hopes that you can leave them and Forestopolis without them caring about you anymore. Trust me... I’ve done this many times, but I do that because I *know*

I'm never seeing that person anymore and they'll just be a distant memory to me. I've accepted it and I don't regret it." He walks closer to Jacqueline, seeing how glossy her eyes are. He continues, "*You*, however? Jacqueline, these are your best friends. You'd do anything to protect them, and they would do the same for you. You five hold so many memories, more memories than I could only *imagine* to have with someone here in this Realm... You are all so different from each other, and yet you compliment one another. This has got to be one of the most beautiful unity of friends I've ever seen. You leave now and you're going to regret it. These girls *need* you. *You need them*. You may be okay when you make it to wherever you're trying to get to...but your world will never be the same. You only get to have this kind of friendship *once in a lifetime*."

Kendo's words sting Jacqueline like alcohol on a fresh, blood-red wound. Jacqueline tries to take deep breaths and balls her fist so tightly that sweat forms, but her soul begins weeping. *Why?* She cries to herself, *Why am I here? Why is this happening?* She looks at Nermal, seeing her break down, and the sight makes Jacqueline's heart shatter. *NeeNee...* she thinks to herself, *You're the last person I wanted to hurt...Please stop crying.*

"Please stop doing this, Jackie," Nermal cries out, looking at Jacqueline, her face and eyes red and puffy, some snot escaping her nose. Tenacity, Rose, and Melissa still hold onto the baby of the group, making sure that she doesn't hurt herself in any way.

*Stop looking at me like that*, Jacqueline begs Nermal within, but can't scream it out for her friend to hear.

Memories begin flooding into Nermal's mind, and she sees them play out like a movie. Hoping that recalling them to her sister will wash the anger away, Nermal whimpers out, "Remember when you saw Tenacity eating by herself, Freshman year of highschool? You wanted

to be around her because she seemed to be the only person in your grade you could talk to and chill with at the time!” Tenacity heart sinks as she remembers the moment Jacqueline opened her obnoxious mouth.

*Stop it.*

“Months later, you and Tenacity met Rose!! You saw her crying her way to the restroom, and you immediately thought of ways to cheer her up! You even offered to fight and prank the person that made her cry, and you told me that Rose laughed at how crazy and quick you were to defend her.” Hearing Nermal’s words makes Rose’s eyes water once more and her heart cries.

*Cut it out!!*

“Weeks later, the academy held the Winter Wonderland Festival, and you got to meet MeeMee through Tenacity!! You thought her shyness was so cute! You were ecstatic to become her friend and take her out to do fun things! You made sure to invite her to every school event in hopes that she’d escape her shell little by little!” Hot tears stroll down Melissa’s rosy cheeks as she remembers the snowy day at the city’s arboretum.

*Nermal, please...!*

“And then there’s me...” Nermal gently motions the girls to let go of her, and she slowly walks up to Jacqueline. “You met me at a beach in Hawaii... You and your family were on vacation, and you saw me... crying because I was looking for help... You were so quick to hear me out despite who I am, and your parents were so open...”

*Only because of the Umrha that saved me...*

“Ever since your family took me in, I never thought that I would be so happy... Even though I do miss my home, I could never just leave you or our friends so easily... And it’s all because I love you all... I love you, Jackie... You’re my best friend and my sister...”

*NeeNee...*

“Anything could have happened to me that day... and I’m so glad that out of all of the humans out here, it was you who found me... Not many humans are kind to my people... So everyday, I’m happy that I live with you... I’m happy that I became friends with a girl that is so willing to share her world with me and all of the good things in it. Your dad can say whatever he wants about you... it doesn’t change the fact that Jacqueline is one of the best people to walk amongst this planet. And I believe I speak for all of us when I say that we all love you, Jackie...and we’re not planning on cutting this bond off...even if you are...”

*...Whimpers... whines....wails.* Jacqueline’s wall made of ice finally melts away as she falls on her knees and buries her face as she realizes that she still has tears to shed. The walls that she attempted to build instantly collapse, and the girls immediately kneel down to her level and cuddle her together, letting the emotions just spill all over the place for anyone to see. Pierre watches the girls, but after a few seconds, he decides to take his leave, seeing that they need space, and it’s because the negative energy that was being released from the situation is transitioning to positive energy, too positive for his nature. Kendo doesn’t notice Pierre leaving as he is too stuck on the beautiful sight of five friends trying to keep the friendship strong despite what has happened to them thus far. The drama, the nostalgia, and the urgency has Kendo hooked the entire time. A few tears and heart strings are pulled as he watches the show. He softly smiles at what he didn’t destroy for once. Usually, he would try to go for a negative and destructive route in solving problems, but his soul dances when he actually manages to help humans positively with their issues. It’s a bliss he rarely craves for, but when he satisfies it, he feels so light on his feet like a Malaiki earning their wings and ascending to the heavens. After a while, Kendo finally follows Pierre, a gentle smile painted on his face.



“Why did you help them?” Pierre finally asks, no emotions showing on his face.

“Because why not~?” Kendo answers, “They are my guardian Malaikis~ It’s only right that I help them in return~”

“Hm... Well, it’s interesting seeing you not be the peoni you’re supposed to be,” Pierre says, his mind focused on trying to find Amethyst. *Where is she? She’s usually with those brats*, Pierre thinks to himself.

“Hmhmhmhmhm~ You can’t talk Pierre~” Kendo pokes fun at the Upindeoni, “I saw you with MeeMee. Trying to be her peace before she could explode. Come ooon, you wanna be buddies with them, too~”

“Shut up. No, I don’t. Anyways, I’ll catch you later. I gotta get back on my mission.”

Kendo giggles at Pierre’s avoidance and walks ahead of him, trying to see all of the places he hasn’t seen yet. Pierre thinks to himself about what he’s going to do next. *Maybe with those brats distracted with their nonsense, it’ll be easier to capture that cat*. He thinks about all of the possible places she could be and decides where he should go first, but then an image of Melissa immediately stands in the way of his thinking process like a deer standing in the middle of a freeway. He then remembers the deal that Melissa made with him, and he immediately ponders if the spar is even still a go at this point. He suddenly thinks about the chance of him losing to her again and having to obey her condition, and his nonexistent heart cringes. He softly growls at himself ‘*Queen Honeybee*’. *Ugh, if that’s the case, I’m never leaving Umu again after this. This experience doesn’t change my view on this Gaia scum. Humans are repulsive. Humans are destructive. I clearly saw that just now! I’m supposed to see them as nothing but tools. They’re nothing but walking puppets. Hell, most of them don’t even like peonis!* He then remembers how

he called her a different name and the feeling that interaction gave him. *So why is she different...? I have to get her out of my head...fast.*

He stops walking for a second and takes a few deep breaths, closing his eyes to clear the images of Melissa and his past. *Okay...Okay... I'm here for a reason and one reason only. I have a mission to complete, and that mission is to capture Amethyst.* Instantly, he has an image of Amethyst in her cat form, his motivation growing. He then thinks about what he just witnessed. *But... if I take that cat away from them...would they react the same they did with Jacqueline just now? Would Melanie be crying? I don't want to hurt her- BA-BUMP!* His heart stops him mid-thought as if it was questioning what he was thinking. Images of him interacting with Melissa began making a comeback, covering up the images of the cat he was here for. Instantly, his brain begins to pound as if it's about to explode at any moment from memories of his Past Life bothering him once again. Images of him being in that cult start to flash, and in the middle of it, a girl is shown smiling, though he can't tell who it is. He immediately runs into a nearby alleyway to where no one can see him, and he takes himself to the Spirit Realm. He grips onto his red hair tightly like he wants to rip it off his scalp and he yells. "AAAAAAAAAAAAH!!! WHAT THE HELL AM I SAYING!? WHAT AM I THINKING!? WHY AM I THINKING ABOUT MY PAST LIFE RIGHT NOW!?" The exclamation startles Kendo who can still hear him outside of Spirit Realm, but instead of going back to check on him, he continues walking down the sidewalk.

Pierre tries to regain himself once more. *"Huff huff huff... Why is this happening to me?... Damn it... What's wrong with me...?"* As he tries to recover from this attack of emotions, he tries to remind himself of his mission: to capture Amethyst so that he can get back home and look for his sister, Amber. Instantly, his eyes light up as he realizes that something is missing.

“Wait a second,” he mutters, as he realizes that it was Melissa giving him headaches this time around and not something else. “...WHERE DID I PUT THAT DAMN BOOK!?”

## Chapter 18

### 200 years ago

“Hello, Alpha.”

“Hello, Morgana...”

“How’s everything at the Pits?”

“It’s the usual...I’m just here to tell Aidoneus that Anti has been captured...again.”

“Oh...Lord Aidoneus sent *you* to go get him?”

“Yeah, apparently we do a better job at capturing him since the Upindeonis would take decades to capture him. We managed to get him after a couple of weeks. The quickest we’ve captured him was a day, but he wasn’t expecting to see us.”

“Ooh... uuuh.. What’s a ‘day’? Or ‘weeks’?”

“Oh. My apologies. Cursed Gaia nonsense. They have this interesting concept for time... and I guess I’m picking up on it...”

“Oooh. Interesting.”

“Yes...”

“...So Anti has always been doing this...”

“Mhm, *long* before you came around. I’m honestly surprised that he’s still doing this even though you two are pretty close.”

“O-Oh! No no, we’re not close, we just talk every now and then. He’ll just come to my office and just start random conversations...nothing special...”

“But from what I hear, he’s always talking to you and *only* you. Hm...*so it’s worse than he thinks...*”

“What’s worse??”

“... Has he...spoken to you about his little ‘adventures’?”

“No...He tells me that he enjoys going to Gaia, but he never explains to me why or what he does there.”

“...Have you seen his room?”

“No, he never invites me there. I don't even know where it's at.”

“Huh...”

“What, is it bad?”

“I haven't seen the inside of it, but looking at the door alone is enough to keep me away.”

“Oh...Well what's wrong with Anti going to Gaia?”

“It's not Anti going to Gaia...It's *what he does* in Gaia...”

“Hm??”

“...I'll let Aidoneus explain it to you, but I'll leave it at this... Anti isn't normal.”

“Well, I mean I figured *that* much out, of course... So him going to Gaia is really that much of a problem...”

“Yep, and if he's not telling *you* anything, then his condition is more out of hand than ever. I should tell Aidoneus about this...”

“Don't worry about telling him. I have to go see him anyway, so I'll tell him. You can go back to the Pits.”

“Very well, then... I'm not supposed to tell you this, but the reason why Aidoneus hired you was because he thought you would be able to convince Anti to actually stay in Umu... since you're attractive, stay to yourself, and whatever else makes you stand out from the rest of his workers in this facility.”

“...!?”

“Aidoneus is a patient man, but it’s been 100 years since he’s hired you... I don’t know if he’ll like hearing that Anti is pretty much treating you like everyone else here despite him talking to you more...”

“...I’ll see what I can do...”

...

### Present

Morgana sits in her chair and rests her head on her clean, dark-brown wooden desk, thinking about her conversation with Alpha so many years back. Alpha was one of the first people she got to know when she got the job as Aidoneus’ office assistant. Kendo, at the time, was interested in befriending Morgana, but he made sure that he still kept his attraction for humans under wraps. It wasn’t until Morgana took initiative and began showing interest in Kendo’s adventures that he began to tell her more and more about his Gaia experiences. Unfortunately, while gathering info and gaining his trust, Morgana slowly fell for his charms and got her emotions involved. “Oh Kenny,” Morgana speaks softly, “Damn you, Kenny...I just want to see you happy...but you’re not here for me to see that smile...I really thought that having access to your room and being the only peoni that gets to sleep with you would really keep you around...Yet you *still* kept running away... What am I doing wrong...? Do I have to be human for you to stay...?”

*Ring ring ring ring ring ring ring ring ring!!* Morgana’s cell phone rings again, and she answers it immediately. “Hello?”

“*Morgana.*” Aidoneus’ voice scrambles Morgana’s mindset back to business mode, activating her emotionless and straightforward tone.

“Yes, my Lord?”

“*You never returned my call. Are you okay?*”

“Yes, sir, I’m fine. I was about to call Kal now.”

*“Hm...Alright then...”*

*“I’m sorry for worrying you. I was...I was just...”*

*“Thinking about Anti.”*

*Ba-bump! “Y-Yes...”*

*“Yes...I know, my dear...I’m missing my son, too. I don’t understand what I’m doing wrong. I give him a place to stay, a woman to ‘love’, a dog to play with, medications to take....what more do I have to do?”*

*“...I don’t know, sir...”*

*“Don’t worry about it, Morgana. I’ll think of something before the meeting. You just keep inviting our friends, okay?”*

*“Okay...”*

*“Before I let you go, I must ask you, my dear. Have you been letting Anti out of his cell?”*

*“...!!”*

*“Morgana?”*

*“No sir, I have not.”*

*“...Hm. That boy is quite creative then. He’s been able to get out of his straitjacket and cell. Even before then, he wasn’t able to leave his room. I thought that by changing the locks to his room and only letting you and I have the key would stop his shenanigans. Now I have to figure out what to change **again** because now he can just waltz out of his cell even though only you and I have access? Very interesting...”*

*“....”*

*“Whoever is helping him should really stop. **They’re only going to make things worse for Anti...So if they really care for that boy, they would keep him here.**”*

“.....”

*“Oh, forgive me, my dear. I was just unleashing a little of my frustration. I know you wouldn’t do that to me...**you’re too loyal.** For all we know, it could be that damned dog doing this. He is a little mischievous fellow, just like his pal. Anyway, carry on~!....**I appreciate you.....**”*

*Beep!* The call ends, leaving Morgana trembling violently. She takes deep breaths, trying not to have another breakdown. “He knows,” Morgana says. “He knows. He knows. He knows. He knows. He knows....So why am I still here!?!” She notices her voice echoing throughout the room, and she immediately covers her mouth in hopes that no one heard her. She fans herself, taking deep and shaky breaths, and she gets up to grab a purple and green iridescent conch from one of the shelves of a tall bookcase behind her.

...

The Lust District, a place in Umu where endless parties and gatherings filled with sexual activity reign. The seven moons have a vibrant royal-blue glow, coloring the district the color of lust. The dark blue district is filled with peonis whose skin is of different hues of blue and purple, pupils that are heart-shaped, and their horns and wings a blue or purple hue but covered in glitter. They also have long, thin, and smooth tails that match the color of their skin. Some of them are covered up in clothing while others are naked, exposing their sacred treasures in hopes to lure someone that craves for physical touch. The clubs, hotels, dungeons, sex shops, and brothels are bedazzled in glitter and neon lights, making the district lively. The tour carriages walk into the district, and the newcomer-peonis take in the glamorous view, stunned by what they see. The tour guide grabs their megaphone and says, “Welcome to the Lust District~! Here is where you can fulfill all of your wildest fantasies, from being gang banged, to being pegged, to even being



cucked~! Whatever fetish you have, it can be satisfied here~! This district offers plenty of enhancements to help satisfy your drive~!”

The tour horses walk through the enchanted town, and the blue and purple peonies begin walking up to the carriages. The newcomer-peonies try to distance themselves for they can hear flirtation and soft moans come from the blue, horned up peonies. The tour guide continues, “These horny souls are called Tansis~! The tansis are peonies just like you, but they take on a different appearance as a way to show their loyalty to Lust. This was what the Lust Quphanto, Kal, wanted~! He wanted to have his followers stand out from the rest of the districts, similar to Abigor and Nasir, but he decided to take it a step further. Once he feels like you have mastered the lustful sin, he blesses you with not only the title ‘Tansi’, but also the lustful hue and glitter to make you stand out~!” The tansis continue trying to distract the newcomer-peonies, whispering sweet nothings and offering lewd services. However, the tour carriages pick up speed so that the tansis is left eating glittery dust.

The tour carriages make it to the center of the Lust District. The area is a huge lake adorned by gigantic blue-purple iridescent gems for the tansis to sit on, relax, talk, and do sexual deeds out in the open. The clean lake glows vibrant blue, the color taking over the district. The tour carriages circle around the humongous lake, and the newcomer-peonies either blush from embarrassment or become aroused from the impure view of tansis kissing, cuddling, and/or having sex in the water. The tour guide continues, “This is the Libido Lagoon~! Here is where most of the residents of the Lust District hang out...literally~! Even though literally all of the buildings here in the district are good places to fuck, the Libido Lagoon is ranked THE BEST place for a date and orgies~! This is practically *the* lounge for tansis~! And if you’re lucky... you might get a chance to meet Kal, the Lust Quphanto himself~!”

In the Libido Lagoon, two tansis sit on a huge gem, cuddling a brown-skinned man while giggling. Both tansis look identical in the face and body(dark indigo skin, magenta eyes with heart pupils, wavy, wild hair, and purple, glittery horns), but the difference is one of them has cotton candy-pink hair while the other one has grape-purple hair. The pink-haired Tansi moans out, “Oh, Beta~ You have no idea how much we’ve missed you~!”

The purple-haired Tansi nuzzles Beta and whines, “Yeah! Chelsea and I literally cried when we heard what happened to you!”

Chelsea says, “Oh god, and Fuschia almost wanted to leave Umu just to find the shithead that messed you up.”

Fuschia continues whining, “I dunno what we would do if our baby had been killed!”

Beta lets out a sigh and groans, “Ladies, I’m Cerberus. I’ve been ‘alive’ for this long. A human is not going to force me into a reset just like that.”

“And I told Fuschia that, honey,” Chelsea says calmly, “But you know how she can be~.”

“Yeah, I know...Aww, you don’t have to worry about me, Fu-Fu~” Beta says to Fuschia as if he’s talking to a gentle puppy, nuzzling her nose and making her giggle.

“I can’t help it, daddy~! It’s not my fault I only lust for you~” Fuschia says, and instantly gives Beta a sloppy kiss, their tongues instantly dancing. Moans escape their mouths, and Beta’s friend downstairs becomes excited.

Chelsea whimpers and pulls Beta away from her twin sister and whines, “Hey, don’t forget about me, daddy~” Beta smirks at Chelsea’s jealousy, and he returns the same affection to her, enjoying the taste of her tongue. He holds the twins close to him as he feels their hands going up and down his chest and abs. They continue sharing each other’s lust, but then bubbles begin forming in the glowing water. *Blub-blub-blub-blub-blub!* The bubbles constantly popping disrupt

the polyamorous trio, and slowly reveal an extremely tall, sandy-tan-skinned man with midnight blue wavy hair only going down to his shoulders.

The tall man looks at Beta and, in a playful tone, says, “Aaah, Beta~! So good to see you here, again~ And I see the nurses did a good job taking care of you~ It looks like nothing ever happened~!”

Beta rolls his eyes and says, “Hello, Kal...Look, I’ll go in just a few minutes, just don’t go telling Alpha...”

“Oh~!” Kal exclaims, “No need to worry, darling~. You know I don’t like getting into your business. Just came to say hello~ Chelsea~? Fuschia~? Don’t keep Beta for too long, okay~?”

“Don’t worry, Master, we won’t hog him from the world~” Chelsea assures Kal.

“Yeah, we just wanna express how much we’ve missed him real quick~! Hmhmhmhm~!”

Fuschia jumps in.

Not saying another word, Kal goes back underwater, swimming back into his cave. He slithers to his prepping space where loads of makeup and nail polish can be found. He lets out a sigh as he grabs for his nail filer and tends to his long ballerina-shaped nails. He takes a second look at himself in the mirror, smiling at what he sees. He becomes entranced as he looks deep into his own dark-blue eyes, his slit pupils dilating. He lets out a soft moan as he puts down his nail filer and adjusts his hair. “Just look at you~” he says to himself, “Nasir *wishes* he could be you~ Oh~! I should call him and see what he’s doing~! But wait...I should see what look I’m going to wear~.” He goes through his makeup, all of them shades of blue, purple, and pink, and he hums as he ponders what he should do.

Suddenly, “*Master Kal?*” A voice comes out of Kal’s pink iridescent conch shell, and Kal’s eyes brighten when he recognizes the voice.

His lower body(which is a blue snake tail with blue, purple, and pink iridescent scales covered in glitter) immediately grabs the conch and holds it to his ear. “Morgana~! Darling~! So good to hear from you~!”

*“Hello, sir. I’m calling to tell you that Lord Aidoneus is inviting you, along with the other Masters, to his place for a special meeting. There will be food, and the topic of the meeting is an event that he’s planning on holding at the Colosseum.”*

“Oooouuuu~ Well, if Aidoneus is holding a meeting now of all times, it must be very interesting~ If I come to the meeting, you have to promise me you’ll come and visit my district~ I haven’t seen you here for a while~”

*“I’ll... I’ll try, Master...”*

“Look, sweetie, I know you’re lusting for Anti and the only way you can stay close to him is if you’re working for his father, but you have so much potential in becoming one of my tansis~! I’m sure Anti would much rather see you working here than for Aidoneus~ It’s so much more fun here~”

*“I appreciate the offer, sir...I’ll at least come back to visit, but you’ll have to give me more time to think about devoting myself to Lust...”*

“I’ll accept that answer for now, dear~ No rush...unless you crave for that~ Hmhmhm~”

*“Thank you for understanding, Master. I have to call Master Vanity soon, so I’ll let you go.”*

“Very well, darling~ I’ll see you very soon~!”

*“Very good, sir...”*

They end the conversation, and Kal immediately slithers to his closet, his snake tail yanking out numerous clothes and letting them slowly sink to the lake floor. “Oh goodie~!! I get to see Demona and Ophelia again~! I hope Abigor misses me~ Alphonse can stay 10 feet away from

me. Ooh, I should pick out a perfume for Vanity...I hope she's feeling better. And Nasir...oh  
Nasir~ I hope he's ready to be outshined by me once again~ Oh, what wonderful friends I have~!  
Ahuhuhuhuhuhuhuhuhuhuhu~!!”

## Chapter 19

July 2017

Night

80's R&B music coming from the Perplexa plays throughout the dimly lit bedroom as Usiku, still in the attire he wore for the day, lays on the naked emperor-size bed, letting his blood-red eyes get lost in the midnight black ceiling's pattern. He lets his mind swim through the chaotic events that have taken place earlier today, not sure how he should feel about it nor how to continue his night. While Usiku lays distraught, Delilah comes in with burning hot black and red satin sheets and pillow cases. The cut that Delilah received from Usiku has completely disappeared thanks to Delilah's Tansi abilities to heal quickly. She looks at her lover as she plops the sheets and cases next to him, and Usiku feels its warmth invading his right side. Delilah groans out, "Come on, honey. I have to set up the bed." However, Usiku doesn't budge. She lets out an exhausted sigh and groans again, "Usi, come on! I have to get the comforter next! Could you *please* move?"

"What kind of father am I?" Usiku finally speaks.

"Huh?" Delilah asks, tilting her head.

"I've been thinking... about what Shandon said today...am I really a good father...? Am I even... a good person?" Usiku croaks out. Delilah's face changes from exhaustion to concern. It took Delilah hours to finally get over what Shandon did and the fight that he and Usiku got into. As pained as she was about how her brother-in-law went about telling Rose the truths about Usiku, Delilah had to remind herself that deep down, Rose still loved them...or so she hoped. However, for Usiku, it's clear that the situation has truly broken him down. Usiku continues, "Maybe Shandon is right...Perhaps I've been given too many blessings... I've never been given the proper punishment until now, I guess."

“Baby,” Delilah says softly as she crawls on top of her troubled lover and gently sits on top of him, looking into his lifeless eyes. Usiku can’t help but be lost in his soulmate’s gentle fuchsia-purple eyes.

“Delilah...Maybe I wasn’t supposed to live for this long,” Usiku says softly, his voice cracking a little, “...Maybe...everything would be better if I was dea-”

“Stop,” Delilah immediately interrupts Usiku before he could finish letting out how he feels. Her brow furrows and her heart starts beating rapidly. “Don’t you *ever* fix your mouth to say that, do you hear me?”

“But ‘Lilah-”

“*No* Usiku! You know how I feel about shit like that! Are you not happy with where you are now!?”

“I am happy....If I wasn’t, I would have already made my exit...”

“Then why would you even say that!?”

“Because I’ve hurt you... I’ve hurt Rose... I’ve done all I could to keep my past in the past... to *protect* Rose from it all... to the point that I would throw Rose’s friends into the mix... just so that Rose wouldn’t see me as the monster I once was. And now Rose is gone...”

“Listen to me. You definitely did make decisions that were looked down upon, but trust me, there are *much worse* men out there. Shandon doesn’t know what you have done for this family. He doesn’t know what you have done for our Rose. And he definitely doesn’t know what you have done for me...”

“Besides killing your ex...?”

“Darling, you had so much patience when I was trying to recover from what happened to me... I was thinking that you’d leave me at one point, but you never did... You stayed by my side...”

“Just like how you stood by mine...?”

“Exactly~” Delilah softly smiles, and her soft and smooth fingers begin caressing Usiku’s facial hair, her long stiletto shaped nails sending chills up and down Usiku’s spine. She gently says, “You and I were wronged by this world... and the moment we met was when our lives would change for the better~ What I have done in the past doesn’t matter now. What *you* have done in the past doesn’t matter anymore. You are Usiku, a man who loves his soulmate and cherishes his daughter. A wonderful lover~ An awesome father~ If I was given the chance to replace you, I wouldn’t take it. You truly are a blessing to me, Usi~ I love you... unconditionally~”

Usiku’s heart begins to pound as he listens to Delilah’s love letter. He doesn’t hear the music anymore; the only music that he’s listening to is his mesmerizing soulmate, her soothing voice massaging his ears. Delilah leans closer to Usiku, her long medium-brown hair caressing both sides of Usiku’s face, the faint smell of her perfume dances upon his nose, and she whispers, “*I love you so much, Usi~*” before gently pressing her lips against his. Suddenly, the dark clouds of thoughts that rained heavily on Usiku’s mind dissipate and Delilah’s love shines through. His body becomes covered in goosebumps as his craving for Delilah’s touch becomes stronger. He immediately sits up, grabs onto Delilah’s body, making the Tansi-human hybrid squeal, and he places her on the bed with him being on top now.



Delilah giggles at Usiku's sudden excitement, and he begins planting kisses all over her warm neck and collarbone. "H-Honey~!" Delilah giggles out, "N-Not yet~! I still have to get the comforter~!"

Usiku stops kissing her and stares at her with a gentle smile, "What~? I can't return the affection real quick~?"

"But you know what happens when we start doing this~" Delilah softly says, her hands going inside Usiku's dashiki, feeling on his hot, fuzzy chest.

"I promise I'll make it quick~ My lips are just dying to feel your supple skin~" Usiku gently growls out as his dense hands brushes away some of Delilah's hair from her face. Usiku plants his lips onto Delilah's, electricity between them goes haywire. They let their tongues dance together for a few seconds before they separate, leaving only a saliva string keeping them connected. "*I love you, my beautiful orchid~*" he growls out as he begins kissing and licking Delilah's neck once more, making her gasp and moan softly. Without even knowing, Delilah wraps her legs around Usiku, making sure that he doesn't get away from her. He begins sucking on one spot on her neck extremely hard, and Delilah softly squeals and giggles.

"*Are you going to make me look like a cheetah again, honey~?*" Delilah moans out tenderly.

"*If that's what you want, my love~*" Usiku groans out.

Delilah nods rapidly and closes her eyes, heightening her sense of touch, and her skin becomes more sensitive to Usiku's mouth. Delilah's moans play along with the music as Usiku starts planting more hickeys on her, lowering her shirt and undoing her bra so that he can get to her ample bosom. The hickeys cover her neck and breasts, and Delilah hopes that Usiku will only want to create more in other places. Usiku takes a second to look at his soulmate, trying to catch his breath. Delilah whimpers from the excitement and arousal building up inside her, and

Usiku becomes fascinated by how her breasts shimmer as she breathes in and out. Delilah opens her eyes to reveal that her pupils are now heart-shaped, and she gently bites her bottom lip to try and contain her moans.

“I love when we do this~” Usiku says, and cups Delilah’s breasts with his hands, watching them jiggle a little. Delilah gasps as she watches her lover, and her heart tingles at the wet feeling of Usiku’s long tongue circling her chocolate-brown areolas. His tongue flicks her nipples, sending intense waves of passion all over Delilah’s body. Usiku stops and presses his lips against her left ear and whispers, *“I feel like making love with you is when my soul gets to heal and recover~ It’s when I get to become more aligned with your soul~”*

Delilah whimpers out, *“H-Honey, save that poetic talk for your love letters to me~ You know what that does to me when you start talking like that~”*

“Awww, you don’t like listening to me talk now~?” Usiku teases.

“N-Nuuu, that’s not what I meant~!” Delilah whines.

“I’m joking, darling,” he chuckles.

“Hmhmhmhm, suuuuure~,” Delilah giggles, running her sharp nails against his back, making Usiku purr.

Usiku whispers, *“I’m glad that you stopped me... I’m glad that I’m still on this side of Life with you~ Without you, I don’t know how I would function...I believe my soul would instantly leave this vessel just to reunite with yours in the Spirit Realm...”*

“Oh my goodness, honey~”

“I know that by tomorrow, I’ll have a clearer mind~...I tried taking on today by myself, but...we see how things turned out...”

*“You did your best, baby... I’m proud of you~ And the next time we see Rose, I’ll be right there next to you~”*

*“Oh ‘Lilah~... The comforter is going to have to wait.”*

*“H-Huh?”*

As soon as Usiku mentioned the comforter, Delilah remembers her current mission. But before Delilah can say anything else to her lustful lover, Usiku abruptly rips her shirt off, making Delilah squeak, and he tosses her shirt and bra onto the floor. “Eep~!!” Delilah squeals, “Usi~!!” He then pulls down her leggings and thong and throws them somewhere else. Delilah, bare naked, watches Usiku take off his dashiki and pants, having only his black boxer shorts and jewelry on. “W-Wait~!” Delilah says as she gets out the bed and grabs the warm sheets, “Let me at least make up the bed~!”

Usiku looks at Delilah, watching as her breasts and butt jiggles from her getting off of the bed, and his heart and head downstairs jump. “Oh come on,” Usiku whimpers as he gets off of the bed, “The bed would just get messed up again...” However, Delilah ignores him as she finally puts the sheets onto the mattress and the satin pillow cases onto the cool pillows. Delilah lets out a sigh of relief as she gently lays back on the now smooth, satin bed, letting the bed fondle her naked body. Usiku watches her enjoy her now-made bed and says, “Good job, babe.”

“Thank you, but the job isn’t over~!” Delilah says in delight, “The comforter should be ready now. Could you go get it for me, honey~? Pleeaaase~?” However, Usiku looks at her with a scrunched up face, his playfulness dying down. Delilah notices this and gets on all fours to put her butt in the air and shakes it as she says, “Pretty pleeeaaase~?” Doing this gives Usiku motivation and finally leaves the room to go downstairs to the utility room.

Delilah sits up from the bed, and reaches for the television remote that lays on her nightstand, but then suddenly *ringringringringringringringringringring!!!* Her phone rings and vibrates through the music. “Hm?” she says, and she looks to see that it’s Shandon calling. She blinks rapidly, her heart-shaped pupils returning to their round shape, and she says, “Perplexa! Stop the music!” Seconds later, Perplexa turns off the melodic music, leaving the room in subtle silence before the phone plays its ringing tone once again. *Ringringringringringringringring!* Delilah grabs her uPhone and answers the call. “Hello?”

“*Dee?*”

“.....Hello Shandon...”

“*Hey...is right now a good time?*”

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t immediately hang up on you right now.”

“*Is Usiku around?*”

“He’s out of the room at the moment, but he’ll be back soon...”

“*Aight cool...Listen, I just want to say that I’m sorry...*”

*Ba-bump!* Delilah’s heart skips a beat and then immediately drops to her stomach. “...For what...?” Delilah asks.

“*For how I acted today...I clearly disrupted somethin’ that wasn’t any of my business, and the way I handled it all was just not right. I wasn’t tryin’ to hurt you or Lil’ Honey... You don’t have to forgive me, but I just wanted to let you know that my intentions wasn’t to see you in pain.*”

“...”

“*I already tried calling Rose, but I guess she’s busy with somethin’, so I left a message.*”

“...I’m in the middle of forgiving you at the moment, so right now, I can’t say ‘it’s okay’ and giggle it off like I usually try to do. While we’re on the topic, Rose and I better not be the only people you’re apologizing to.”

*“What you mean?”*

“You know exactly what I mean, Shandon.” After saying that, Delilah gets off of the bed and starts walking around slowly. “You need to apologize to Usiku.”

*“...Can’t do that.”*

“Uh, yes you can.”

*“I apologize to you and Rose for letting you two see me like that. I’m not apologizing to Usiku for doing what he should have done a long time ago.”*

“You knew that Usiku was trying to do the right thing, you fucking asshole.”

*“That jungle fiend caused the most damage throughout the years. The damage he’s caused is irreversible. You and I both know that.”*

“Okay, but you was here doing the same thing-”

*“That bastard took lives left and right. He didn’t get caught. He didn’t even apologize, Dee!! He doesn’t feel bad!!”*

“You don’t know that-”

*“But I’M the one that gotta apologize for calling him out while he sits there and plays ‘victim’. Yeah okay.”*

“The fuck you mean ‘play victim’?! You attacked him!! Plus, he apologized to me when he saw how I reacted to the news about Frankie and his past ‘hobby’...”

*“Where’s my apology then!?! Where’s Rose’s apology!?”*

“He was coming around, Shandon!! He could have gotten to say that he was sorry to Rose if you wouldn’t have interrupted!! Hell, he most likely was going to say sorry to you too if-”

*“Dee, it’s been more than 20 goddamn years. He still hasn’t apologized for trying to kill me. He still hasn’t apologized for just straight up murdering the friends I made in that gang RIGHT IN FRONT OF ME.”*

“Is this what’s been going on with you two? Every time you and Zeena came to visit-”

*“Every time we come to visit, the same questions roll through my mind. Why the fuck did you choose him? Why the fuck is he not in jail yet? Why the fuck is he not in pain....**suffering**? When is the bad karma supposed to hit?”*

“... So that’s why you were always so distant on your visits... You were never happy for us...you asshole...”

*“No, Dee... I was never happy for **him**....and until Usiku either comes and begs for my forgiveness or lays in a hospital bed begging for someone to put him out of his misery, I’m not fucking apologizing **or** forgiving him...”*

“...”

“He never gave a damn about me... so why should I give a damn about him?”

“Because you two are brothers!!”

*“Fuck that...blood doesn’t matter...I thought out of all people, **you** would understand that...”*

“Ugh...”

*“...I love you, Delilah....Really, I do... I just-”*

*Bloop!* Delilah ends the call and tosses the phone onto the bed. Her heart beats rapidly and hard like a band performer at a football game. Her mind sprints like it’s trying to get away from a

monster in a deep, dark forest. She tries to process what just happened. *So this beef that Shandon has with Usi... has never died*, Delilah thinks to herself, *He's been upset with Usi for this long.*

Before Delilah could continue her thoughts of dismay, Usiku walks in with a thick and fuzzy black and purple comforter. They look at each other in heavy silence, the conversation between Delilah and Shandon still hangs in the air. Usiku puts down the comforter, and Delilah walks up to him and cuddles him. Usiku, not saying anything, returns the affection and cuddles her back, nuzzling her. Delilah looks at Usiku and says, "Did you...hear any of that?"

Usiku nods, still staying silent. Delilah exhales the stress and pressure from her soul and buries her face into Usiku's chest, trying to inhale his soft cologne scented peace and contentment. "I don't understand Usi," Delilah says softly, "It was so easy for me to forgive you and move on...Why is it difficult for Shandon...?"

Silence.

"Is it true, Usi? Did you never apologize to Shandon...?"

"...It's true," Usiku finally answers, "I never had the heart in me to apologize for what I did...However, with you, it was different... I truly didn't want to lose you, 'Lilah...'"

"But you're okay with losing your brother...?" Delilah asks.

"..." Usiku thinks about that question. Ever since Usiku met Shandon, it was never a peaceful moment between the two, and they didn't know why. Usiku would always want to fight Shandon, possibly even kill him, but the two people that stopped him were his uncle and aunt. Literally, the only time they could be in the same room was the one time they got high together. Other than that, it's always either silence, words made of venom, or punches being thrown. Even after the catastrophic event with the gang, they still couldn't see eye to eye simply because of how they viewed life and death at the time. After meeting Delilah, Usiku has been trying to

move on, not wanting to think about what's been done in the past nor did he want to acknowledge it; however, Shandon always made sure to remind Usiku somehow of his decisions. That's why the two half-brothers/half-cousins dread seeing each other. That's why they can't stand being around each other's energy. Usiku hates that Shandon held this grudge for so long. Shandon hates that Usiku made it look so easy to move forward. However, perhaps there is a middle ground, and after more than 20 years, after what has transpired today, Usiku's soul now wants to achieve that middle ground with his brother. He realizes that he not only has to make things right with Rose...but he must also make things right with the man he's tortured for the longest.

Usiku breaks off the connection between Delilah and him, and he walks towards the phone's location. "What are you doing?" Delilah asks. Usiku picks up the phone, goes into Delilah's contacts, and calls Shandon back, putting the call on speaker. Delilah's eyes widen at what Usiku is doing.

Suddenly, the dial tone stops and they hear a "*Hello?*" Shandon's voice fills the room. Usiku looks at the phone, looking at the picture Delilah chose for Shandon's contact; it's an old picture of Shandon and Zeena together, holding Rose when she was a little girl. Seeing Shandon's ecstatic smile and Rose's innocent smile stabs Usiku's heart, knowing that the only time Shandon ever smiles like that is when he's around Zeena, Delilah, or spending time with his only niece, Rose. There is no such thing as smiles when he's around Usiku unless they're trying to inflict harm to one another. "*Dee? You there?*" Shandon interrupts Usiku's analysis, and Usiku looks up at Delilah, fearing for the worst. Delilah walks up to him and wraps her arms around him, trying to give him support and brush away the anxiety.



Usiku takes a deep breath and finally says, “Shandon, it’s me. Can we...meet up somewhere and just...talk?”

Static silence comes from the other side of the call. Usiku’s heart pounds from his brother not saying anything, most likely creating a face of disgust. Delilah tightens her grip on Usiku’s arm, praying that Shandon will come around. Suddenly, they hear mumbling in the background, as if two people are bickering. Then Shandon says, “*The fuck you say, asswipe?*”

“...I want us to talk...”

“...*What’s there to talk about?*”

“Please don’t start, you know what I’m implying... You clearly are troubled by what happened in the past, and I just-”

“*Save yo’ bullshit, Usiku. The only reason you’re comin’ around is because of what happened today.*”

“So instead of just hashing everything out, you decide to just block me off.”

“*Maaan, here we go.*” Suddenly, Usiku and Delilah hear Shandon leave the phone and hear him say at a distance, “*I can’t do this shit, bruh!! I’m not about to do this!!*”

Suddenly, Delilah’s face scrunches up and looks at Usiku who looks at the phone in confusion. Then they hear Zeena in the background say, “*Shandon, come on. Usiku tryna make shit right wit’ you. Ain’t this what you wanted-*”

“*Nah, you hearin’ him!?*” Shandon exclaims, “*He doin’ that shit again, tryna make me look like I’m the problem!?*”

Suddenly, Usiku’s eyes shoot wide open, and he raises his voice saying, “No one is trying to make you the problem, you *fool*. I’m genuinely trying to correct my mistakes with you now after so long, and here you go trying to cut me off.”

*“Well I don’t appreciate you tryna make it seem like you’re the victim!”* Shandon yells.

“News flash, numbskull, *everyone* is a victim of something. I can’t tell if you’re trying to use reverse psychology on me, but it’s not working. Either you agree that we meet up and talk this shit out, or you can just sit there and bitch about what I did in the past, and you won’t have to worry about seeing me again. But whatever choice you make, don’t act like I didn’t try to attempt to fix this shit.”

“...”

“Do it for Rose, at least, Shandon...please...”

*“...How are we ‘bout to do this...?”*

“I would like for us to meet up at this spot where it’ll only be you and me....or us with Zeena and Delilah, however you want to do it...”

*“.....Fine... We can have our ladies with us...I need someone to be my witness...”*

“...Very well...”

Delilah rolls her eyes at Shandon’s choice of words.

*“I’m assuming that a few of our sisters will come around and teleport us to the place you talkin’ ‘bout?”*

“Yes. We’ll do this two days from now...I want us to gather our thoughts and regain ourselves before seeing each other again...”

*“Aight...don’t be up to some bullshit, bruh...”*

“I gain nothing from doing that, Shandon...”

*“Yeah aight...”*

“Well....you have a good rest of the night...”

*“Uh-huh...”*

“....”

“.....*You too*...”

## Chapter 20

Yesterday

July 2017

Afternoon

After checking on the girls at Tenacity's apartment, Alexander and Amethyst make it to Alexander's van, and they share no words until they leave the parking lot. Alexander turns on some disco music from the 70's, bopping his head to the current song playing. Amethyst looks at her lover, face scrunched up, as if Alexander totally forgot about their conversation in the hallway. Amethyst turns down the music and says calmly, "Just so we're clear... We are *not* visiting Usiku's parents."

Alexander's face changes from one of carefree to one of dismay; however, he makes sure that his eyes are still on the road. He says, "But they've done a lot for us, Amy! We can't drop by to just say 'hello'?"

Amethyst rolls her purple eyes, and she hisses back at Alexander by saying, "The letters I write to them are enough...they don't need anything else."

Alexander notices the harsh attitude that Amethyst has when talking about Usiku's parents. The atmosphere around her becomes almost unbearable for the Upendelaiki, but he knows that this must be talked about. He lets out a long sigh, trying to send oxygen to his strained brain, and he asks Amethyst, "May I ask *why* we're keeping our distance from Mwezi and Zola? I mean I know that they-"

"Are you serious?" Amethyst asks in disbelief, "It's because of those two that Usiku was the man that he was before..." Alexander disconnects from the world from hearing Usiku's name. He thinks back to when he was talking to Kendo about Rose and Usiku, how the chaotic being described the two. Angry. Confused. Sad. Kendo even dared to accuse that someone made Usiku the 'monster' he once was, someone extremely close to him. However, only a few people were

close to Usiku when he was a child: his father, his mother, Amethyst, and Alexander. Even when Usiku was in school, the classmates didn't attempt to befriend him. Suddenly, "ALEXANDER, THE LIGHT!!" Amethyst screams at the dazed Alexander, and he snaps back into reality, and he slams on the brakes right before he is about to pass the red light. *SKRRRRRT!!!* The tires screech in pain from the forceful brake.

*Could it be true then?* Alexander asks himself, *Did Mwezi's teachings really get to Usiku? I would have thought that because of his sisters that he would forget about what Mwezi taught him. But I see that I was wrong.* Suddenly, something clicked within Alexander. He looks at Amethyst and asks, "Wait...How did *you* know about Usiku's wrongdoings?"

"When we first found him here and met Delilah," Amethyst explains, "He wanted to tell me privately what he's been doing...He didn't want to tell you because he didn't want you to worry about him." *Ba-bump!* Alexander's heart pounces from that heartfelt statement. Amethyst continues, "He knows that you've always seen him as a sweet little boy that just needed love and affection, and he didn't want to ruin that image for you. He was afraid that you would distance yourself from him if you knew what he had done."

"Oh..." Alexander croaks out, "Usiku...Heh...of course, he would tell you. You are his 'second' mom..."

"I wanted to tell you, Alex," Amethyst admits, "But Usiku made me swear not to tell you or anyone else..."

"..."

"Zola's negligence and Mwezi's teachings made Usiku, Alex... and I can never forgive them for what they've done...The one child that I got to babysit was always crying or to himself. I was

glad that you were there with me. Even though Usiku did become more comfortable with me as time passed, he would need someone to laugh at and make fun of.”

“Hehe, yeah, he always did lau- HEY! He made fun of me!?”

“Hmhmhmhm, yeah. Even back then, he called you the ‘babbling idiot.’”

“Aw come on! I’m not *that* much of an idiot!”

“No, but you *did* talk a lot...still do. Hmhmhmhm!”

The light finally becomes green, and Alexander continues driving to their destination.

Memories of the times that Alexander and Amethyst lived with Mwezi, Zola, and Usiku begin to flood back into the lovers’ brains. Alexander starts with saying, “Remember the time when...”

However, he stops mid-sentence. Usually, when going down memory lane, Alexander and Amethyst are able to just talk about the positive times, the times when they laughed or had some sort of fun doing something. When it comes to Usiku, however, such memories are almost nonexistent. Alexander doesn’t want to resurrect the sad memories, so he says, “Never mind... I just... I thought that after everything, we’d be able to look back and perhaps find some sort of good in it. Mwezi didn’t have to hire us or help us out, but he did. And despite his ways, he did make Usiku happy when he was around. However, he did hurt a lot of people... and I guess I’m just... trying to excuse it... trying to forget about it... I’m sorry, Amy.”

Amethyst’s heart sank as she knows that Alexander is only trying to lighten up the mood, but alas, no remnants of the past can aid him. So Amethyst places her hand gently on Alexander’s warm right thigh, and she says softly, “It’s fine, Alex. Usiku may not necessarily be okay...but...he’s doing better now that he has Delilah and Rose... and we’re here to witness that.”

“Yeah,” Alexander agrees. Then, he remembers how Rose explained that her uncle and aunt are in town, and her uncle is causing havoc within the family. Alexander says, “Hey, so enough about Mwezi and Zola, let’s talk about what happened today... What do you think of Shandon doing what he did?”

“*Sighs*...Again, it’s Mwezi’s fault...” Amethyst sternly says, “If Mwezi didn’t kick out Nyota and Judith, Shandon and Usiku would have been the best of friends and siblings...”

“Yeah, but... to be fair, Mwezi was pretty hurt with what they did,” Alexander explains, sorrow tightening his throat. Amethyst huffs and puffs from Alexander’s statement, thinking about the times Alexander would try to help Mwezi and support him in any way he could. She knows that Mwezi and Alexander were practically good friends; however, when Mwezi began to show how dangerous he truly was, Alexander couldn’t help but to feel sorry and hurt seeing him that way. Even through those dark times, Alexander stayed by Mwezi’s side, trying to pull him out of the darkness he craved for.

“He didn’t have to go cursing them and banishing them out of the country!!” Amethyst exclaims, “Look I get it...Nyota was his brother...he betrayed him with Judith...but Mwezi took it too far. Taking Nyota and Judith to the U.S.? Cursing him and hoping that his children and grandchildren would suffer and have a life full of struggle? That’s just messed up!”

“Yes...Yes, I know...”

“And the fact that Nyota still wished Mwezi the best!! Mwezi didn’t deserve Nyota’s kindness!!”

“*Sighs* And then Usiku and his sister were born afterwards....”

“...Yep, Usiku and Zawati were born five months after....”

Spiky silence took over the atmosphere. Alexander sees the apartment complex, and sighs, “Hey, we’re home...Let’s just relax for the rest of the day, okay?”

“Yeah...” Amethyst murmurs out.

...  
**Present**  
**Morning**

Birds sing ‘good morning’ as the sun rises, sharing its warm rays with Forestopolis. The sun lights up Amethyst and Alexander’s bedroom, the white walls and cream-colored carpet welcoming the morning light. Alexander lays in the queen sized gray satin bed, cuddling one of the white pillows, while Amethyst gets dressed, putting on a black sleeveless top and dark blue jeggings. She looks at Alexander, seeing how he is deep in the Dream Realm. She grabs her black shoes, slips them on, and she grabs her laptop to order a Dazzle. She opens the nightstand drawer and grabs a yellow sticky note and black pen. The silent and focused woman writes on the sticky note ‘*Alex, I’m going to go check on the girls. Whenever you get up, go check on Usiku...Make sure he’s okay.*’ She leaves the note on the flatscreen television, and goes outside to let the cool morning breeze brush her face and hair as she waits for the Dazzle to arrive.

...

The Dazzle makes it to Tenacity’s apartment, and Amethyst quickly says, “Thank you,” before exiting out of the vehicle. She walks into the complex and walks up the stairs and heads straight to the room that has the healthy balance of light and dark. Amethyst knocks on the door. *Knock knock knock knock!* She waits for a minute until the door finally opens, revealing Tenacity in her black robe, rubbing her eyes and yawning. Amethyst softly smiles, seeing how Tenacity is the same lethargic young lady she met.



Tenacity adjusts her brown eyes and sees her 'second' mom standing in front of her, and she grumbles, "Oh... Wassup, Ames?"

"Just came to check on you, dear. Are the others with you?" Amethyst asks.

Tenacity simply nods and lets Amethyst into the room. Amethyst walks in to see Melissa sleeping on one long black couch, Rose sleeping on the other long black couch, Nermal with a sleeping bag sleeping on the floor, and Jacqueline sleeping on the single gray couch with the recliner out. Amethyst softly gasps and says softly, "Oh dear. I thought that you all would be up by now..."

Tenacity mumbles, "Yeah, but we stayed up pretty late last night... Had a whole revelation within the group yesterday."

"Oh... Did you, now?" Amethyst wonders walking towards the windows, seeing how the black blinds are closed shut, not letting an ounce of sunlight into the living room.

"Yeah, long story short, Jackie tried to leave town while also trying to end our friendship so that we wouldn't care about her, but she knows damn well we couldn't drop her just like that."

"Oh my... Why would she do that...?"

"Her folks are tripping. After we calmed her down, we just came back here and just chilled."

"Ah... Well I'm glad that you were all there for her." Amethyst doesn't say anything else as she opens up the blinds, flash grenading Tenacity. Tenacity covers her eyes and hisses at the light, and the other girls groan from the intense warmth nudging them awake. The girls sit up, rubbing away the sleep from their eyes, and they murmur their hello's to Amethyst. Amethyst walks to where everyone can see her, away from the light. She clears her throat and says, "Good morning, ladies. It is good to see that you are doing well. I know that yesterday was filled with

much emotional strain, but today is a new day, and I would like for us all to have one day of relaxation. No errands. No training. Just the Special Six having a blast at the Peace Lily Spa!”

Instantly, the girls perk up, their eyes widen and their hearts and brains jump into high gear. Amethyst then smiles and says, “And yes, as Manager, I will be paying. Now get ready~!” The girls instantly squeal and cheer for Amethyst as they instantly get up and stretch.

They all take turns with the bathroom, brushing their teeth, washing their faces, and they all get dressed. They all grab a Wally-World plastic bag to pack a set of exercise clothes and their purses, and they walk out to Melissa’s and Tenacity’s vehicles. Tenacity, Amethyst, and Rose go into Tenacity’s car while Melissa, Jacqueline, and Nermal go into Melissa’s. Tenacity takes the lead, and they drive off to the Peace Lily Spa.

...

Peace Lily Spa is a high-end spa found in the town square, and it’s not hard to miss it with its large, white peace lily logo plastered onto the glass doors, the title of the spa in cursive. Through the windows, anyone can see the bright lights illuminating the front desk. The girls park across the street, and they walk into the spa. Amethyst goes to the front desk, telling the clerk that she’s paying for all six of them, including herself. While Amethyst goes through the process of paying for the girls, Jacqueline looks around, remembering how her mom, Nermal, and her used to come to this spa all of the time. Now, she gets to make spa memories with her friends who could only wish to pay for a spa visit as expensive as this one without having to worry about repercussions afterwards. Jacqueline softly smiles and says to her friends, “Y’all are going to *love* this spa~! They have pretty much everything~! Nice lounges, Comfy restrooms, fine ass masseuses, everything~!”

Nermal's smile grows and her heart flutters from the sight of her friend and sister cheering up and slowly recovering from the events of yesterday. "Yeah," Nermal agrees, "We used to come here all of the time! I wonder if a lot has changed."

"Eh, I doubt it," Jacqueline predicts, "The only difference we'll see is, like, maybe the products they're using for facials and massages, but that's about it!"

Tenacity, Rose, and Melissa listen to their two friends, but then Melissa is pulled by a text message from her dad. She rolls her eyes, and not bothering to read the message, she texts him back.

**Melissa:** Hey, dad. I'm still with my friends. I'll come back home later on in the evening. Love you.

She puts her phone on silent and stuffs it back into her purse, and Amethyst turns around and announces, "Alright, ladies, are you ready?"

In unison, the girls say, "YEEESS~!!"

...

### **Afternoon(3 hours later)**

After spending time getting massages, facials, attending a yoga class, and enjoying smoothies, Amethyst, Tenacity, Rose, Jacqueline, Melissa, and Nermal chill in a private sauna. The heavy yet soothing steam opens up the girls' pores, trapping them in a summery embrace. Amethyst keeps her eyes close, picturing what she wants at the moment and in the near future. She opens her eyes to see all the girls chatting amongst themselves. Amethyst closes her eyes and opens her ears, listening to what the girls are talking about.

Jacqueline says, "Okay, so, like, I still want to do the tournament~! But because of what happened yesterday and our spa day today, we're pushing it back to tomorrow~!"

Tenacity groans out, "Uuugh, are we seriously still doing this?"

Nermal jumps in, “Well why not? That could get you a chance to see Issei again~”

Tenacity stutters, “W-Why y'all tryna have me and *him* be together so badly!?”

Melissa teases, “Tee? It’s obvious. You have a thing for him~”

Jacqueline joins in, “Mmmhm~ I’m startin’ to think you didn’t accidentally back up against him at prom~”

Tenacity tries to stop the love train, “No no no! It *was* an accident!”

Rose giggles, “Aww Tenacity, you’re being so adorable~!”

Melissa adds, “Oh yeah, and Pierre is wanting to join us.”

Nermal asks, “Huh? Why?”

Melissa answers, “Because he’s trying to capture Amethyst again. But don’t worry... I’ll handle him~”

Jacqueline states, “It’s settled then~! We’re gonna take care of business and have Melissa kick Pierre’s ass first! Then, we’ll have Issei and Tenacity fight each other~! And whoever comes out on top gets to fight me~!”

Tenacity snaps, “Why the fuck are *you* the final boss?”

Nermal adds in, “Yeah! What about Rose!?”

Rose mumbles, “H-Huh?”

Nermal explains, “She should get a chance to hone her skills too!”

Rose disagrees by saying, “Nermal, all I do is summon insects! I’m not necessarily a fighter!”

Melissa pushes Rose’s excuses by saying, “Rose, we witnessed how you were acting with Cerberus. You’re not foolin’ anyone.”

Tenacity agrees, “Yeah, I bet you can throw hands. You just don’t want to.”

Rose whimpers, “It’s just...I don’t want to hurt you guys...”

Jacqueline reassuringly says, “Rosie, you’re not going to hurt any of us! You wouldn’t even hurt a housefly! I’m sure you know how strong is too strong, ya’ know?”

Nermal adds, “And plus, if they do get hurt, you can always heal them!”

Amethyst stops listening to the girls. *So they want to put their skills to use, huh?* She thinks to herself. She starts rubbing her stomach gently, and she looks down and smiles at it. *I guess we should join the fun while we can...right, little one?* Amethyst looks at the girls and calmly says, “How’s this, ladies? Melissa vs. Pierre, Issei vs Tenacity, Jacqueline vs Rose, and whoever triumphs gets to fight me.”

The girls’ eyes widen from Amethyst’s offer. Rose looks at Amethyst’s stomach, remembering the discovery she made back at the forest. “Uh, Amy, are you sure you want to join?” Rose wonders, “I mean....” Question marks hover the girls’ heads as they look at Rose and Amethyst. Amethyst understands Rose’s concern, but she nods her head.

“I’m sure, dear,” Amethyst says, “I’m sure this will be fun! I can’t wait to see who will conquer it all, hhmhmhmhm~!” Saying that doesn’t ease up Rose’s uncertainty and worry, as the sight of Amethyst’s flat stomach grips at Rose’s heart. “Well, I’m sure it’s almost time for us to be done with our spa treatment! Let’s get ready to go and I’ll treat you all to some fast food, and we can all go back to our homes with a fresh mind~!” Amethyst gets up from her seat and walks to the exit, leaving the girls behind.

The girls get up and walk slowly, but before exiting, Tenacity speaks softly, “What was that about, Rose?”

Jacqueline whispers, “*Yeah! You made it seem like Amy shouldn’t be fighting right now.*”

Melissa adds quietly, “*She was doing pretty good back at the forest, wasn’t she?*”

Nermal steps in, “*Yeah, Beta did her dirty, but she held out for a very long time!*”

Rose's heart stomps around in her chest as it decides whether or not to tell the girls what she found out. She was going to wait until Amethyst told them herself, but seeing how Amethyst is willing to throw herself into the tournament, it's clear that letting the presence of another soul be known to everyone is the last thing Amethyst wants to do. However, flashbacks of Beta kicking Amethyst's stomach instantly punch Rose's brain and yank her heart strings. Suddenly, "Rose, what's up?" Rose snaps out of it from Tenacity's voice being filled with anxiety.

Rose takes a deep breath and looks each girl in the eyes, looking deep into their voids for pupils, and she says, "You guys *have* to stay quiet about this. I don't know why she doesn't want to tell us, but....Amy is pregnant."

## Chapter 21

Morgana's fingertips tap dance on the keyboard as she responds to emails from different residents of Umu at lightning speed. She looks over her responses, her eyes scanning everything to make sure that there are no mistakes. Despite keeping herself busy, Aidoneus' words from earlier still haunt her. She feels heavy breathing aggressively brush against her neck, and a dark presence plays with her heart strings like they are violin strings. Her breathing becomes short, her brain becoming scattered. Is it him? Or is it *him*? Morgana's fingers stop dancing and her eyes begin seeing nothing but a blur. She slowly turns her head to see who's behind her, her heart banging against her like a scared teenager banging on a door in hopes that someone will open before their killer gets to them first. *Kenny, you know how I feel about you sneaking up on me*, Morgana prepares herself, hoping that it's perhaps Kendo playing around. However, the distressing possibility of the person behind her being Aidoneus tightens up her esophagus. *Please forgive me, my lord. I'm sorry, I promise I won't free him ever again*, Morgana pleads in her mind, begging for the person behind her to not be her boss, Aidoneus. She finally turns her head to get a clear view of who's behind her, however...no one is there.

Morgana sighs out of relief and disappointment, and she rests her hand on her chest, trying to get her heart to calm down. She adjusts her kinky, maroon-red hair and red and gold cat-eye glasses, and she gets back to completing her current task. Suddenly, *arf arf! Arf arf!* Morgana slightly jumps at the sudden outburst. She looks at the door to see a gray pitbull running straight through the entrance, no need for someone to open the door. The pitbull immediately runs to Morgana's legs and rubs his head against them while whimpering softly. Morgana scoots her seat away from her desk so that she can lean down and pet the dog. She lets her fingers trace the scars on top of his head and the side of his mouth. She caresses the pitbull's right eye socket where

there would be an eye, but the socket is vacant. Morgana looks into the pitbull's left ice blue eye and says softly, "Hello, Diablo..."

*Arf! Arf! Arf!*

"Did you ever give Pierre back his recorder?"

*Arf! Arf!*

"You...gave it to Kendo...? *Sighs* Close enough... Good boy." Morgana digs through her desk drawers to find a bag full of beating hearts and grabs one out, the cherry red heart pulsating in Morgana's hand. Diablo's tail wags rapidly as he begins panting heavily, his purple tongue salivating and moistening the floor. Morgana hangs the beating heart over Diablo's head, and she squeezes the heart, blood spilling out like a waterfall. Diablo manages to catch every drop of blood that falls; any blood that didn't make it to his mouth paints his messy, gray fur, replacing the dingy color with something more vibrant. Diablo licks his lips and savors the flavor of the blood while Morgana walks to a trash bin and throws the used heart away, its vibrant red glow along with its beat nonexistent. Morgana grabs a few wet wipes and wipes the blood off her hand that stains it. "How's Kenny, Diablo...?"

*Arf arf arf arf! Whimper...*

"Yeah...I miss him too, boy...But at least you get to still see him...Meanwhile, I'm stuck here..."

*Whimper...*

"*sighs*...Oh. Right. Vanity." Remembering that she has to call the one and final friend to invite them to Aidoneus' event, she gets comfortable in her seat and uses her office phone to dial the last friend's number.



...

The Pride District, a place in Umu that is considered the Pride Quphanto's 'home for celebrities'. The seven moons have a vibrant royal-purple glow, coloring the district the color of pride. The dazzling district has multiple restaurants, cafes, museums, movie theaters, clubs, hotels, and art studios that fill the district with life and 5-star quality entertainment. All of the buildings are decorated with dancing lights that attract the eyes of nobodies and billboards advertising the Pride Quphanto's talk show 'Let's Talk(About Me)'. No simple peoni can just enter these establishments unless they have enough blood rubies to bribe their way in. There is no grain of sand in sight since the roads are concrete and the sidewalks are also concrete with every celebrities' name engraved in glittery gold inside of their own sparkling purple star. peonis try to gather around other peonis that wear designer clothes and jewelry while paparazzis try to take pictures, but bodyguards keep them all at bay as the celebrity-peonis make it to their destination either calmly or giving their fans the bird and exchanging discouraging words which the fans eat up.

The tour carriages walk through the clean streets, the horses' hooves click clack against the concrete. The newcomer-peonis take pictures of the purple buildings and try to see the celebrity-peonis that bless everyone with their prideful aura. The tour guide says, "Welcome to the Pride District~! This is where all of Umu's celebrities come to hang out and chill~! This is practically their playground! This is also where all of Umu's award shows take place! The celebrities, whether they are singers, dancers, painters, chefs, or whatever they are known for, are called Elites! Of course, you have your Paparazzis and Bodyguards, but the fans have interesting names. Fans are called Birds here, but they are separated into two groups. The fans that are supportive and show overly positive support are called Crows, and the fans that want to come

around just to rain on an Elite's parade are Ravens. Whether they love or hate the Elite...they are all the same~! They're fans~! All attention is good attention~!"

The tour carriages walk down the road and get closer to the end of the road, which is closed off by tall golden gates. The carriages circle around slowly, trying to turn around to get back on the road, while the newcomer-peonis see the modern penthouse that glows a vibrant purple, the glow taking over the entire district. The tour guide continues, "This is the home of the Pride Quphanto herself, Vanity~! This is where Vanity holds her show, and only Elites are invited to be a part of her live studio audience! Everyone else has no choice but to either watch her from a nearby television or mobile device, or we can listen to her on the radio! You'll come to find her show very entertaining. You should definitely check her out when you get the chance~!" The tour carriages make the complete circle and get back on the road, making their exit, while black-gold and white-gold limousine carriages circle towards the gate, and the golden gate automatically opens, letting the limousines inside.

The limousines cruise on the glittery road towards the penthouse. The first limo stops in front of the penthouse, a body guard opening the door for the celebrity to step out and plant their clean shoe on the velvety purple carpet that leads to the entrance. The celebrities walk in and are welcomed by the front desk, assistants offering coffee and whatever food is available at the moment. The celebrities then walk to the right where the entrance to the studio is located. The studio is a huge dark area, and there are enough seats in the audience area to fill a football stadium. Camera-peonis prepare themselves and make sure that the cameras are where they are supposed to be; the sound-peonis test out the mics, theme music, and sound effects; and the Elites take their seats, their behinds sinking into the plush, purple material that makes the seats feel like pillowy clouds. The Elites hold quiet conversations with each other as they wait for their

hostess to strut across the stage and take a seat in her purple and gold throne and talk about whatever steaming gossip she has up her sleeve. Behind the plum purple curtains, a director-peoni checks if everything is in order, communicating with everyone. He looks around and mumbles to himself, “Now where is Mistress Vanity?”

A hundred stories above the studio, Vanity sits at her silver dresser, looking at herself in the large silver mirror that is adorned with bright lights, making it easier for her to do her makeup. She adjusts her large dark-purple afro, making sure that it’s a perfect sphere, and wipes off any excess glittery lipgloss from her full lips. She stands up and looks to the left where her full-body mirror stands proudly, showing what Vanity wants to see: a curvaceous dark-brown skinned Quphanto in a see-through white robe. She smirks at her reflection, her black panther tail swaying back and forth, and she does various poses, accentuating her moon-sized behind and ample breasts. She looks at her extra long stiletto-shaped nails, and she walks back to her dresser to grab a bottle of clear nail polish. As she shakes the bottle, she looks up at her dresser-mirror and looks to the top left, and immediately her heart sinks. She looks at the picture of a black cat with glowing light-purple eyes and purple galaxy patterns covering its four paws and the tips of its ears and fluffy tail. The cat smirks at the camera as it lays on Vanity’s satin bed. A tear appears in the Pride Quphanto’s left eye, but she immediately daps it away and opens the nail polish to paint her nails. Suddenly, her cell phone rings, and she whips her attention from the cat to the phone that vibrates on her bed.

Vanity gets up and walks to her bed and plops on it. She grabs her phone and sees that it’s Morgana calling. She answers the call, puts it on speaker mode, and says, “Have they found my Carnation?”

*“No, ma’am...I deeply apologize. We are truly trying-”*

Vanity's smooth, rich voice thunders, "I told Aidoneus not to have you or anyone else up there call me until my Carnation has been found!!"

*"I understand, Mistress Vanity. But I'm afraid Aidoneus is wanting to invite you and the other Quphantos to a meeting."*

"I don't care about a damn meeting! If Aidoneus wants me to come over, he better have Carnation in his arms!!"

*"...Vanity...?"*

*"Sighs Whatever. It seems you all want me to wait for another century."*

*"It's not like that, Mistress-"*

"Oh really? Because last time I checked, Aidoneus promised me to get my Carnation back...but every time his son was captured, my beautiful pet was nowhere in sight."

*"Every time Cerberus found Anti, Carnation wasn't around. I don't know if you've heard, but Cerberus failed to bring Anti back this time..."*

"Oh? Is that so?"

*"Yes, and the Upindeoni that was sent with Cerberus hasn't come back yet, either."*

"Huh, *finally*, someone devoted to looking for my treasure."

*"Aidoneus is wanting to have this meeting to plan an event that will take place at the Colosseum. I believe that he is going to talk about his son... and Carnation."*

"..."

*"Please accept the invitation, Mistress. You know how Aidoneus feels about you..."*

"And he knows how I feel about my Carnation."

*"This meeting will be unbearable without your glorious presence..."*

"...Aidoneus told you to tell me that, didn't he?"

*“No ma’am...I just know that having you here always ‘motivates’ Aidoneus. You’re his favorite.”*

Vanity’s deep amethyst-purple eyes twinkle and slit pupils dilate from that sentence. She then says, *“Purrrrrrrrrrrrrrr~!! Very well then~. I will attend this meeting, but the moment that it’s over, I want my Carnation back immediately afterwards.”*

*“Yes ma’am, of course...”*

*“Well, my show is about to start. Make sure you tune in~.”*

*“Very good, Mistress...”*

Vanity hangs up the phone and removes the see-through robe. She walks to her large, black closet and opens it to see many long, glittery dresses. She grabs one dress that is a see-through light purple, the diamond raindrops and glitter bouncing off of the ceiling light. Her eyes then drift to a large trophy case that stands proudly next to her closet, thousands of golden trophies reminding her of all of the awards Carnation and she’s won throughout the eons. Her tail sways as she says softly, *“Oh, my beautiful Carnation...I cannot wait to have you back in my arms... You’re the only best friend I had...the only soul that truly understood me...”*

## Chapter 22

July 2017

Evening

Issei yawns as he sits in the Shrouded Library, sitting at one of the computers, having numerous tabs open involving the devil. In a span of two days, he's been able to find a lot of information about the enemy. He could have made the Shrouded Library his sleeping place, but the library closes at a certain time of night, plus he would rather sleep in his plush bed back at his apartment. He clicks on the tab that is a PDF document of a news article that dates back in the 1920's. He scans through the words for the thousandth time, seeing how the article explains how back in 1917, a dark cult committed mass suicide in order to 'transcend to Umu and become their true selves'. He looks at the images of the cult members: Their bodies covered in dark-red cloaks and their faces protected by white expressionless peoni masks. Issei prints out the file and walks to the printer a few feet away from him, and he grabs the papers, looking at the words and pictures of cult members once again. He grabs a thick stack of stapled papers he has already printed out, seeing that it is a snippet of *The Reaper's Contract*, and he scans through the words that he highlighted; it was risky for him to find this since he had to go to a site on the dark web that had the entire book available. Suddenly, his phone vibrates, interrupting his concentration. He looks at the phone and sees that Tenacity left him a text message.

**Tenacity:** *Hey. So we talked about the tournament thing. We're gonna start around the afternoon time tomorrow. I'll send you the link to where we're gonna meet up.*

**Issei:** *Okay cool. So do we know who's fighting whom?*

**Tenacity:** *Yeah, so it's me vs you, Melissa vs. Pierre, Jacqueline vs Rose, and whoever wins gets to fight Amy. Nermal will spectate.*

**Issei:** *So Amy wants to be the final boss?*

**Tenacity:** *Basically. But... we have a problem with her even trying to participate.*

**Issei:** *Why? What's up?*

**Tenacity:** *She's pregnant.*

**Issei:** *....And you guys are just now finding this out? 😏*

**Tenacity:** *It's more like Rose figured it out after our fight with the Cerberus Brothers and Pierre and she's just now telling us.*

**Issei:** *So this entire time, Amy's been pregnant? And she fought the Cerberus Brothers with us!?*

**Tenacity:** *Pretty much!!*

**Issei:** *But...why?*

**Tenacity:** *We don't know... Honestly, this ain't the first time that cat hid something from us.*

**Issei:** *Okay, so we all know now that she has a baby inside her...and you guys are STILL gonna let her participate...*

**Tenacity:** *We were honestly gonna tell her to not participate, but the moment we were gonna bring it up, she said she had something to do.*

**Issei:** *...Okay, well I'm not participating in the tournament then.*

**Tenacity:** *For real?*

**Issei:** *Uh yeah, I'm not about to fight a pregnant woman. And honestly, y'all shouldn't participate either.*

**Tenacity:** *...I'll talk to the girls about it, but I'm sure we'll all agree with you.*

**Issei:** *Something isn't right. Why would she throw herself into battle like this knowing she's carrying a child?*

**Tenacity:** *You think she tryna get rid of it?*

**Issei:** *Could be a possibility, but that's a fucked up way to go about it. We'll talk more about it later. I'm still doing research on some things involving the devil. I think I'm finally about to crack the code on this shit.*

**Tenacity:** *Oh yeah, so speaking of which, I read most of the books you gave me yesterday. We can talk about it when we see each other, but I think that if we run into Kendo one of these days, you think he'll tell us everything?*

**Issei:** *Knowing him, I doubt it. He gave me a difficult time throughout the entirety of the mission. Wouldn't tell me why Cerberus was chasing him in the first place.*

**Tenacity:** *Hm... We'll figure out something. I'll text you later. I'm gonna talk to the girls about all of this.*

**Issei:** *Alrighty. I'll text you soon, babe* 🍷💕

**Tenacity:** *Hah..no* 😏

**Issei:** 🙄

**Tenacity:** 🙄

Issei puts his phone down and continues looking at *The Reaper's Contract* excerpt and the cult article. After doing a deep analysis, Issei mumbles to himself, "I'm not really finding anything. This cult was just simply a group of people that treated the devil like their god... And much like peonies, they devoted themselves to learning the ways of the seven Sins. Nothing in here really explains his plans... except maybe ...." He stops mid-sentence as he flips through the stapled papers and goes to the last few pages he highlighted. He says, "There was one part I think caught my eye, but let's see..." He analyzes the words that are plastered onto the page.

*Lucifer will take over Gaia. The humans believe that this realm already belongs to "The Devil", but if that was the case, this world wouldn't have even a pinch of hope or*



*positivity. Malaikis wouldn't dare roam around these parts right now. Soon, Lucifer will have a son, and he will use him and his followers to cover this realm in darkness. His son will throw everything into chaos. However, like everyone in the universe, we all have to give away something in order to blossom and transform....in his son's case, his flesh. When the time is right, Lucifer will hold a ceremony where every peoni will witness his son's transformation. His son will give his life away for our victory, and he will come back as a powerful and wild spirit that not even the Reaper can grasp.*

Issei reads this paragraph a few times until his brain places the puzzle pieces together. *The Fallen Malaiki. Umu's Savior.* The devil wants to be a god. He then thinks back to the spiritual stories that he was told throughout his childhood and suddenly it all... *click!* "Wait a minute," Issei mutters to himself, "*That's* why he wants Kendo back. In order for him to achieve this 'dream' ...he feels like he has to *kill* his own son! But Kendo was acting like this whole situation wasn't a big deal...does *he* know what's up?" He immediately packs *The Reaper's Contract* excerpt and the article into his bag, and he texts back Tenacity as he storms out of the library.

**Issei:** *Ayo Tee, I'm coming to your place. We need to find Kendo. NOW.*

...

As Rose looks at the ceiling, lost in its design and creating faces out of them, Tenacity eats a bowl of honey-flavored cereal while waiting for her game to load. She grabs her phone from the coffee table and goes through the group chat. She looks at all of the memes that Nermal, Jacqueline, and Melissa have been sharing throughout the day after hanging out at the spa. Suddenly, she thinks about the tournament, which leads her to thinking about Issei. She places her cereal on the table, and she lays back on the couch as she sends a text to the peoni hunter.

**Tenacity:** *Hey. So we talked about the tournament thing. We're gonna start around the afternoon time. I'll send you the link to where we're gonna meet up.*

**Issei:** *Okay cool. So do we know who's fighting whom?*

**Tenacity:** *Yeah, so it's me vs you, Melissa vs. Pierre, Jacqueline vs Rose, and whoever wins gets to fight Amy. Nermal will spectate.*

The game that Tenacity put on finally loads her into an open world with many other players. Her avatar just stands in the middle of the city while the other players cause chaos with their weapons and vehicles. Some of the players even kill Tenacity's avatar, but that doesn't break her attention from the phone, waiting for Issei to text back.

**Issei:** *So Amy wants to be the final boss?*

**Tenacity:** *Basically. But... we have a problem with her even trying to participate.*

**Issei:** *Why? What's up?*

**Tenacity:** *She's pregnant.*

**Issei:** *....And you guys are just now finding this out? 😏*

**Tenacity:** *It's more like Rose figured it out after our fight with the Cerberus Brothers and Pierre and she's just now telling us.*

**Issei:** *So this entire time, Amy's been pregnant? And she fought the Cerberus Brothers with us!?*

**Tenacity:** *Pretty much!!*

**Issei:** *But...why?*

'Why' is a good question. This entire time, Amethyst hasn't shown any signs of pregnancy. Tenacity looks up at the ceiling as her head pounds, still trying to wrap around everything that's happened thus far. It's as if something new is thrown into the equation every day and it's

expected of Tenacity to adjust to it all and figure it out in under seconds. *Why Amethyst?* She asks herself, wishing that Amethyst was here, *Why would you not say anything about your pregnancy?* Tenacity gets back to texting Issei, not wanting to leave him waiting for a long time.

**Tenacity:** *We don't know... Honestly, this ain't the first time that cat hid something from us.*

**Issei:** *Okay, so we all know now that she has a baby inside her...and you guys are STILL gonna let her participate...*

**Tenacity:** *We were honestly gonna tell her to not participate, but the moment we were gonna bring it up, she said she had something to do.*

**Issei:** *...Okay, well I'm not participating in the tournament then.*

**Tenacity:** *For real?*

**Issei:** *Uh yeah, I'm not about to fight a pregnant woman. And honestly, y'all shouldn't participate either.*

**Tenacity:** *...I'll talk to the girls about it, but I'm sure we'll all agree with you.*

**Issei:** *Something isn't right. Why would she throw herself into battle like this knowing she's carrying a child?*

**Tenacity:** *You think she tryna get rid of it?*

**Issei:** *Could be a possibility, but that's a fucked up way to go about it. We'll talk more about it later. I'm still doing research on some things involving you know who. I think I'm finally about to crack the code on this shit.*

**Tenacity:** *Oh yeah, so speaking of which, I read most of the books you gave me yesterday. We can talk about it when we see each other, but I think that if we run into Kendo one of these days, you think he'll tell us everything?*

**Issei:** *Knowing him, I doubt it. He gave me a difficult time throughout the entirety of the mission.*

**Tenacity:** *Hm... We'll figure out something. I'll text you later. I'm gonna talk to the girls about all of this.*

**Issei:** *Alrighty. I'll text you soon, babe* 🍷💕

*Ba-bump!* Tenacity's heart trips on its two feet after her eyes scan that text message.

Suddenly, warm and fuzzy memories begin crawling out of the graveyard in her brain. She looks back up the ceiling again and lets out a long frustrated sigh that echoes throughout the room.

Rose hears her friend's distress call, and she says, "You doing okay, Tee?"

"Yeah," Tenacity answers, "It's nothing..." Minutes later, her avatar, now covered in scars and open wounds, still stands in the middle of the city, other players still continuing the cycle of killing her and letting her revive herself. Rose looks at the television and notices the commotion, and then she looks at her human best friend.

Rose tilts her head, perplexity showing on her face, and she asks, "Are you *sure* you're okay?"

Not answering, Tenacity grabs one of the pillows and squeals into it, flailing her feet around, accidentally knocking over her cereal. *Ker-splat!* Her cereal falls, the milk and cereal pieces painting the carpet. The commotion startles Rose and her, and she looks at the mess she's made and growls out, "*Shit!!*" She gets up and walks to the kitchen to grab a bunch of paper towels to clean up the mess.

Rose slowly gets off of the couch and she says, "Tee, do you need any help?"

"No, it's fine!!" Tenacity exclaims, stopping Rose at her tracks. As she walks to the crime scene to clean it up, she thinks to herself, *Can this all just slow down...?* She looks at her phone

which waits for her return on the couch, and she pats down the paper towels so that they can soak up the almond milk. She grabs the phone and mutters to herself, “I’ll tell him, soon...Just not right now...When this is all over...We can talk...” She starts texting her response.

**Tenacity:** *Don’t call me “babe”...not until we talk about what happened before...*

But before she could send the text, she reads it to herself. Frustrated, she deletes the text and sends a new response.

**Tenacity:** *Hah..no* 🙄

**Issei:** 😞

**Tenacity:** 😞

“There,” Tenacity says to herself, “That should make him want to focus on the mission more.” Although her determined brain is proud of her choice of words, her lonely heart aches. Rose hears every single word that Tenacity thought only she could hear; however, seeing how Tenacity is choosing to handle her predicament by herself, the Quphanto/Tansi hybrid chooses to stand aside until she’s needed. Tenacity looks up to see her avatar in the game being tortured, and she grabs her controller to take her avatar to the nearest hospital so that her character can get rid of the scars and wounds she’s gotten from Tenacity ignoring her. While waiting for her avatar to heal, Tenacity texts in the group chat.

**Tenacity:** *Hey, we should cancel the tournament and confront Amy.*

**Melissa:** *I 1000% agree.*

**Jacqueline:** *Usually, I’d argue with you, Tee, but for once, I’m with you.*

**Nermal:** *It’s just so sad! Why would she put herself in danger!?* 😞

**Jacqueline:** *MY thing is why did her boo thang let her fight?* 😞

**Melissa:** *Right, like did HE know?* 🙄

**Nermal:** *Uuuggghhh so many questions!! 🤔*

**Tenacity:** *I already told Issei about what's up, and he let me know straight up that he's not participating. I think we should all meet up at the place Rose suggested, but as soon as we all pull up, that's when we start the confrontation.*

**Jacqueline:** *An intervention 🙄*

**Nermal:** *Wait... Tenacity, you have Issei's phone number???*

**Jacqueline:** 🙄🙄🙄

**Melissa:** 🙄🙄🙄🙄

**Tenacity:** *Yeah? We're all working together, so I don't see why I wouldn't have his number. Speaking of which, we should make another group chat with all of us and Amy in there. She gave me her number before we all went our separate ways today.*

**Jacqueline:** *HOLD UP! PAUSE! WE NOT GONNA JUST GLOSS OVER THE FACT THAT YOU HAVE ISSEI'S NUMBER! SIS, WHEN DID YOU GET IT!? 🙄*

**Tenacity:** *That doesn't matter 🙄 Let's focus on the situation at hand.*

**Melissa:** *We're sorry, sis. It's just that you've always acted some type of way when around Issei, we never thought you'd have his phone number. 🙄*

**Ba-bump...**

**Nermal:** *Yeah, you're always acting like he gets on your nerves most of the time.*

**Ba-bump...Ba-bump...**

**Jacqueline:** *Right!? Why are you sending mixed messages, ma'am!? You're always pushing that dude away knowing damn well you want him to rearrange your guts! 🙄*

**Nermal:** *I wouldn't go that far... 😊*

**Ba-bump. Ba-bump. Ba-bump.**

**Melissa:** *Well I mean we DID just learn about a LOT of new shit AT ONCE. Maybe she's just wanting to take care of all this before dealing with her emotions.*

**Nermal:** *But that's not good! 😞 She can at least let us know what's up!*

**Melissa:** *NeeNee, some things we gotta deal with by ourselves...*

**Ba-bump!! Ba-bump!! Ba-bump!! Ba-bump!! Ba-bump!!**

**Jacqueline:** *Well she better at least tell Issei what's up before he goes looking at some other broad. 😏 Because, he's like INTO her into her.*

**BA-BUMP BA-BUMP BA-BUMP BA-BUMP BA-BUMP!!**

**Nermal:** *That's what I'm saying!! If she doesn't want to tell us, that's fine. But she should at least be open with Issei and not entertain him for so long just to make him feel like he's wasting his time. 😞*

**Tenacity:** *He and I dated before.*

**Nermal:** 😏

**Melissa:** 😏

**Jacqueline:** 😏

**Jacqueline:** *BITCH WHAT!?!?*

**Tenacity:** *I have Issei's number because we dated before. There. Now you know.*

**Jacqueline:** *BITCH WHEN!?!?*

**Tenacity:** *It was after we graduated. We kept it private because I wanted to see what our relationship would be like before going around and bragging about it. Clearly, we didn't work out after about two months.*

**Jacqueline:** *BITCH WHY!?!?*

**Nermal:** *But you two clearly still have feelings for each other!!... Right?? Or maybe we're just assuming?? Whatever the reason is behind your break up, surely it's possible for you to try again if you really wanted to 😞*

**Tenacity:** *Look, let's not make this about me okay? 😞 This is exactly why I didn't want to talk about this shit in the first place.*

**Nermal:** *Teeeee, we just want to see you happy, that's all 😭 And it's clear now that this has been messing you up for some time now... 😞😞*

**Tenacity:** *My emotions don't matter!! Okay!? We're over here dealing with Amy along with the possibility of Kendo's dad stirring up some more bullshit because his son is here ALONG WITH all of your families dealing with whatever dirty laundry they wanna air out, AND YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT ME NOT FOCUSING ON MY NONEXISTENT LOVE LIFE?*

**Nermal:** *But Tenacity, your struggles matter too!! No matter how small they seem to you!! 💔*

**Melissa:** *I know I said that we all should have our privacy, and I STILL STAND BY THAT, but Tee you can't be bottling this stuff up either. 😞 At least let Issei know what's going on with you. Communication is key ✨ THAT'S what you be telling us.*

**Jacqueline:** *Or better yet, let us fulfill our role as your besties and tell us what's going on so that we don't worry about you 😞 We thotties gotta stick together!*

**Melissa:** *We love you, sis 💕 We won't talk about you and Issei anymore after today. We were just so shocked...*

**Nermal:** 💕💕💕💕💕


Tenacity's eyes slightly water over the warmth coming from her friends' love and care through the phone. She suddenly feels soft arms wrap around her from behind, and she looks to see that it's Rose. "Sorry," Rose says softly, "I saw the whole thing... I left my phone back at the



house.” Tenacity couldn’t say anything, but she uses her free hand to hug her Quphanto/Tansi friend back, the affection making her tears fall effortlessly. “You’re doing the right thing to not entertain the emotions,” Rose confirms to her human comrade, “If pushing your love life aside makes you feel better, then do that. Issei will be okay. It’s about you right now.” Tenacity softly smiles from Rose’s reassurance and motivation to take everything one step at a time. Before Tenacity could send her last text, she sees a notification pop up, letting her see what Issei texted her.

**Issei:** *Ayo Tee, I’m coming to your place right now. We need to find Kendo. NOW.*

Tenacity sighs out, “Speak of the devil,” causing Rose to giggle a little and nuzzle her gently. Tenacity wipes the tears away, pushing away the words ‘love’ and ‘intimacy’ out of her sight, and she adjusts her focus on the main issue. She texts to the group chat as she enjoys Rose’s comfort.

**Tenacity:** *I’ll explain everything later...Let’s just get this confrontation shit over with. Thanks y’all...Love you* 

## Chapter 23

July 2017

Evening

In the Spirit Realm, Kendo struts into a large white mansion, not having to open any doors. He's blinded by the bright white and crisp gold-yellow colors that take over the living room. "Ooouuu~" Kendo coos at the scenery, loving the sight of the clean white carpet and the two sets of white marble stairs that lead up to the next story. He begins prancing towards the luscious, red couches and plops on one of them. "Goddamn, this feels like a good \$20K~!" He looks at the ginormous sized television that hangs on the wall, waiting for someone to turn it on. Kendo gets off of the couch and skips to the kitchen, its polished brown floor glistening against the sunlight that comes from the many windows that surround the area. The silver high-tech refrigerator pulls Kendo in with its seductive shine, and Kendo opens it, finding whatever goods he can grab. "Hmmm, let's see~" He looks at all of the fruits and vegetables that flirts with his eyes with their vivid colors. But then his eyes are allured by the pitchers of water, orange juice, milk, and cans of soda that chill in the middle layer. "Oh man, so many options~!! The only question is...should I risk getting caught~?"

He snickers at the possibility of someone seeing him make his breakfast, curious as to what they would do if they did discover him. However, he hears footsteps walking down the stairs in the living room. *Tap tap tap tap tap tap tap!* Bare feet echo throughout the empty first story, and Kendo stays at the opened fridge, wanting to see who it is. After a couple of seconds, Kendo's eyes widen and his heart stops for a second when he sees that the bare feet belong to a cozy Nermal.

Nermal, in her purple unicorn onesie, texts on her yellow phone, anxiety splattered on her face. She lets out a sigh and puts her phone in her pocket, but when she looks up, she sees the refrigerator already opened. Her eyes widen and her jaw drops from the sight. "Huh?" she

squeaks out, “When did this happen?” However, not questioning it anymore, she walks to the refrigerator, and Kendo steps away even though she wouldn’t know of his presence even if he ‘bumped’ against her(unless she was good at sensing the extremely cold aura that spirits give off).

Nermal grabs the fat-free milk and opens the glass cabinet door to grab a medium-sized green bowl. She opens the top, white marble drawer to grab a golden spoon and put it inside the bowl. Kendo watches his new friend walk to the next room which is the dining room where the family would come together to spend some ‘peaceful quality time’. Nermal puts the bowl and milk down so that she can go back to the kitchen to grab her favorite cereal. She opens the light brown wooden cabinet and grabs a pink box that says ‘Pixie Dust’ with a pixie smiling and waving her wand around six marshmallow pieces: a pink and red heart, a purple star, a yellow and orange sun, an indigo and green crescent moon, a blue flower, and a yellow smiley face. She walks back to the dining room, and opens up the box and pours out the cereal, the sound of the marshmallows and random shaped oat pieces hitting the bowl. *Clink-clank-clink-clank-clank!* She then carefully pours the milk into the bowl, and stirs the cereal around with her spoon. Leaving the box and pitcher of milk on the table, Nermal sits down and eats her cereal, grabbing her phone out again to scroll through her social media.

Kendo, still in Spirit Realm, stands at the entrance of the dining room, contemplating whether he should talk to her or not. He thinks back to the conversation they had at Burger Queen yesterday, remembering how comfortable he was to be around her and talk to her. “But how in the world am I gonna do this?” Kendo ponders, “Should I just pop up here?...Noo, that would scare her...Oh! Maybe I can act like I just walked in!....But then she’d wonder who let me in.... Oh oh! I got it! I’ll go back outside, knock on the door, and *she* lets me in~!....Uuggghh, but I

don't feel like doing all that.." He whines and whimpers at the choices that laugh at his indecisiveness. But then, *ding!* A lightbulb shines bright above his head, and he looks at you, the reader, in eagerness. He steps away from Nermal's line of sight, transforms into a black and white shih tzu, and exits the Spirit Realm. *Surely she loves cute small dogs, right?* Kendo asks himself, *It's hard to get scared by such an adorable creature such as myself~!*

Suddenly, Nermal hears soft pants coming from the kitchen. With cereal in her mouth, she turns her head to see what it is. Seconds later, a black and white shih tzu pitter patters into the kitchen, its fluffy fur bouncing around. Nermal gasps, swallows her food, and says, "Awwwww!!! A puppy~!!!!" The shih tzu runs up to Nermal's feet and nuzzles them, tickling her. "Hahahahaha! Okay okay! Gimme just a sec!" Nermal says cheerfully before stuffing her mouth with three spoonfuls of cereal, the sugary delight mixing in with her excitement. She then picks up the dog and lays it on her lap, its tail wagging rapidly. She pets the dog, enjoying the feel of its soft plush fur. "Oh my gosh, you're so cute~!!" she muffles out, "Where did you come from, lil' guy? Did mom bring you here?" The dog doesn't say anything, under the trance of Nermal's fingers scratching its fur. "You're such a cutie~!" Nermal says, swallowing her food and pouting her lips, and the compliment makes the shih tzu look up at her. Nermal notices that the dog's eyes are a red-orange and yellow ombre. That's when more questions begin to form. "Wait a second..." she begins, "...Kendo is that you!?"

Kendo hops off of Nermal's lap and lands on top of the dining table, making sure not to knock over anything. He sits down and says calmly, "Yes, it's me, cutie~! Um...Sorry for... 'tricking' you, I guess you can call it. I just didn't want to scare you..."

"W-Well...I appreciate you doing that," Nermal says in a sweet tone, "But how did you even get in? How did you even find this place!?"

“Well, when you’re a super rich family, it’s kinda easy for people to know where you live and put that info in the dark web~!,” Kendo says cheerfully, leaving Nermal in silence. Seeing how discomfort begins to take over the innocent hybrid, Kendo reassures her by saying, “B-But I just happened to see this place and just got curious about what was inside~! I didn’t know *you* lived here.”

“Well, yeah, this is Jacqueline’s parents’ place,” Nermal confirms, “I live with them because they adopted me!”

“Oh! I didn’t know this was the Brookes’ residence!!” Kendo exclaims.

“Shhhhhh!!” Nermal begins whispering, “*Jacqueline is upstairs taking a shower, but she could be done by now! I don’t know how she’s going to react seeing you here!*”

“Oh! Right!” Kendo whispers back, “*Well, uh, it was nice seeing you again, cutie~! I better get going anyways...gotta find my other friend~!*”

“You’re talking about Pierre right?”

“Yep~!”

“Oh! Well, could you tell him that the tournament has been canceled? We’re still meeting up tomorrow though if you two wanna join us. We’ll be at a certain meadow that Rose knows about. *If you have a phone, I can send you the coordinates.*”

“Oouuuu....Uuuh, I’ll have to go get a phone first...for the umteenth time...”

“That’s okay! *If fate keeps bringing us together like this, maybe it’ll do it again!*”

“Fate...?”

“Mhm! *You’ll see what I mean!*”

Before anything else can be said, “NeeNee?” Jacqueline’s voice echoes from upstairs, “Hey! We should definitely stuff our faces with food at a buffet or something before we rest up for this intervention shit tomorrow! My nerves are all over the place!”

“Huh!? But we already ate,” Nermal immediately answers to not raise suspicion. Kendo’s shih tzu body glows and then disappears, and Kendo is back in the Spirit Realm. Leaving Nermal confused, Kendo runs out of the mansion, beginning his search for Pierre. Nermal whispers to herself, “*I’ll see you again, Kendo...! Please be safe!*”

...

Pierre, in the Spirit Realm, flies to a familiar apartment complex. He stands in front of the structure, looking up at a specific window. “No more fooling around,” Pierre mutters, “I can worry about the book some other time...”. He grabs out his bronze recorder, and he licks his lips. “***Time to end this...***” he growls out, but before he could play his instrument, ***BAM!*** A strong force shoves Pierre, making him lose his balance. Pierre regains his balance and glares at whomever took away his focus. “WHAT THE F-”

“BEST FRIEND~!!”

“...Kendo, what the fuck do you want now?” Pierre sneers, his pink eyes turning into blades.

“I had to find you to tell you that the girls are not holding the tournament!” Kendo whines.

“...Okay?” Pierre groans out.

“*Buuuuut* we can still meet up with them if we want to~! I think they have something crazy happening, and I *have* to watch~!” Kendo says joyfully.

“Yeah, that’s great...Now go away.”

“Don’t you wanna see-”

“I don’t care for those girls, dumbass. I could care less about them right now.”

“Aaawww, but you don’t mean that~”

“I sure as hell do. I’m wasting time being here at this point. I came here for one thing and one thing only, and that’s-”

“Pussy~!!”

“.....”

“I’m talking about Amethyst since she’s a cat...get it~? What were you thinking about, you nasty~?”

“I’m wasting time entertaining your bullshit. Go fuck with someone else.” Pierre looks back at the window and sees Amethyst walking around, looking out of the window to take in the peaceful view, and Pierre’s pupils become slits. His leathery wings flap out of excitement and his brick-red horns appear. He hisses out, “*It’s time to come down here, kitten... Playtime is over...*” He takes a deep breath, placing his fingers where they need to be to play a particular note on the recorder, but as soon as he plants his lips onto the instrument, *BAM!!* Kendo shoves Pierre once again, not having much luck this time as Pierre recovers much more quickly.

“AAAH!! KENDO!!”

“BEST FRIEND~!!”

“BITCH, MOVE SOMEWHERE! GO!! SHOO!!” Pierre yells, bucking at Kendo in hopes that the chaotic jokester would run off like he usually does. However, Kendo’s face is blank, no emotion written. Pierre’s heart and brain pounds from frustration, and he snarls, “WHAT PART OF ‘MOVE SOMEWHERE’ DON’T YOU UNDERSTAND?”

Kendo tilts his head while looking up at the gray sky, the humidity intensifying. He then looks back at Pierre with a smirk and says, “You know what, buddy?... I don’t really feel like moving~.”

Pierre, with his anger staying present, puts his recorder away, and he summons his dark spear. “You know what?” he says, as a smirk crawls on his face, “Fine. Change of plans. You want to be a good ‘friend’? Just stay right there and let me batter and bruise you up. That way, while you sit there unconscious, I can grab that cat real quick, and we can all go back to Umu~. I’m sure your father will pay me *much* more handsomely if I were to bring *both* targets back at the same time~.”

“Hmm...Kinky~” Kendo purrs out. He then gets in a fighting stance, and as soon as he balls up his fists, fire surrounds them.

“HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!” Pierre cackles, “*You!*? Fighting back!? Oh, this is going to be too easy!!”

“I wouldn’t get so cocky, red velvet~” Kendo replies, “I *did* attend a few fight clubs before~”

“Yeah sure...And if you have, I bet all of those parties you went to along with all of the humans you’ve messed with throughout the decades really rotted your brain. Your sorry ass probably can’t even *land* a punch.”

“Well, let’s see~ Come at me, red velvet~”

Pierre and Kendo, still in the Spirit Realm, stare down each other. Pierre gets in his fighting stance, preparing his spear, and Kendo gets in his fighting stance, readying his flaming fists. Pierre charges towards the chaotic jokester and thrusts his sharp weapon towards Kendo, but Kendo manages to dodge the attack. The Upindeoni attempts a few more times, but doesn’t succeed in landing an attack as Kendo gracefully dances away from the offense. “Stay still, dammit!!” Pierre growls out as he stops trying to poke Kendo, and he begins to swing his spear in hopes that his staff would bruise up Kendo. *Swoosh! Swish! Swish! Swoosh!* The sound of the



spear shoving the wind to get to Kendo shakes up the jokester; Kendo's dance moves are not smooth and playful anymore because of the ruinous spear's cruel actions.

Seeing how motivated Pierre is, Kendo stops playing around and starts pushing away the spear. Pierre's eyes widen once he notices that his swings are making contact with Kendo but not how he expected. Every time his spear attempts to touch Kendo, Kendo only blocks it with his fiery arms. Kendo begins to see opportunities opening up to him, and he takes advantage of them as he grabs the spear and yanks it, pulling Pierre into a headbutt. *BONK!!* Pierre's and Kendo's heads collide, causing Pierre to lose balance and his spear to disappear. Kendo immediately punches Pierre's face, the burning sensation taking over Pierre's left side of his face. Kendo goes for another punch, but Pierre shakes the dizzy feeling off and puts up his arms to defend his face. Kendo keeps throwing the burning punches in hopes that Pierre's walls will break down, but seeing that Pierre isn't budging, he holds his punches, dancing around to keep his energy up. Pierre keeps his guard up, trying to study Kendo. Kendo, circling around Pierre slowly, asks the Upindeoni, "Why are you doing this, Pierre?"

Pierre eases up and says, "Why am I doing what?"

Kendo asks again, "Why are you trying to take Amethyst back to Umu with you?"

"For money, duh," Pierre sneers out.

"But why would Pops want Amethyst?" Kendo continues asking.

"Like I'm going to tell you, outcast," Pierre snaps.

"It just doesn't make sense, bestie~!" Kendo whines.

"Enough talk." Without saying another word, Pierre gets close to Kendo, summons dark brass knuckles, and starts attempting to punch Kendo, but Kendo keeps his guard up and dodges some of the punches. Kendo sees another opening and tries to punch back, but Pierre manages to avoid

the flames. They continue the dance until they finally manage to land punches on each other's faces and chest areas. *BOOM! BOW! BOOM!* Punches echo throughout Spirit Realm as the two souls batter and bruise each other, blood beginning to paint the ground. The punches stop as they catch their breath. Pierre, now with a bloody nose and mouth with cuts on his cheek and chin, stares at Kendo, who has bloody cuts painting his cheek and eyebrow, blood running down his chest and nose. However, the wounds don't stop Kendo as he still tries to keep his guard up and manages to land another punch on Pierre, this time on his stomach. *BOOM!* The punch knocks the air out of his system, the air forcing itself out of Pierre's mouth. Kendo steps back, and before Pierre can catch the air he just lost, Kendo's right foot becomes surrounded by dark aura; he lifts his right foot and kicks Pierre in the chest, and like a cannonball, the impact knocks Pierre off of his feet and forces him to get on the ground.

Kendo walks up to Pierre and places his foot on Pierre's chest, pressing it to make sure Pierre can't get up with ease. Kendo looks at his opponent with a menacing smirk and giggles, "You really thought you could defeat *me, Pierre?* I'm surprised you didn't call up your pets this time around~" Pierre struggles to get up, but Kendo applies more pressure to his foot. The chaotic hybrid continues, "Now answer my question~ Why would Pops want Amethyst?"

Pierre looks at Kendo with irritation burning in his heart and eyes, and he huffs out, "I already told you that I'm not telling you anything."

Kendo lets out a soft, disappointing sigh, and he says in a monotone voice, "Let me give you some context, you thick-headed asshole... *You* are an *Upindeoni* that takes care of *Umu* animals and captures animals that have *escaped* from *Umu*. *Amethyst* is a *Gaian* animal that is supposed to *stay* in her respective realm and *can't enter Umu*. So why is *Aidoneus* needing *Amethyst?*"

"..."

“You see why the shit isn’t clicking?”

“And do you see why I could care less?”

“If you could care less about all of this, then you can honestly walk back home-”

“And not get paid!? After the hoops and hurdles *I* had to jump over!? After Alphonse pretty much played me for a fool!?! ***Fuck that.***”

Kendo looks at Pierre with the same blank face he’s been having. Even after defeating Pierre, the determined Upindeoni still refuses to explain why Aidoneus is targeting Amethyst. Kendo’s heart rate increases as he tries to figure out his father’s intentions. It’s very clear why he would want Kendo to come back to Umu, but what business does he have with a Gaia resident? After several seconds, Pierre says, “I’ll admit this, though. About Aidoneus needing Amethyst...He’s been looking for her for about a century now...”

Kendo’s eyes shoot wide open, and he exclaims, “What!?”

Kendo’s foot eases up a little, and Pierre manages to raise himself a little from the hard ground, and he groans out, “Yeah, every time Aidoneus had Cerberus look for you, he sent someone to look for Amethyst in hopes that you two would be in the same area. Hell, this broad is so important that he’d send someone to search for her even *after* capturing you.”

Kendo’s eyes begin to squint, the cogs inside his brain trying to process the information. He then says, “Well, great, I know now that Amethyst is about as famous as me...*but why!?*”

“I dunno...”

“Come on!!!”

“Wow, Kendo raising his voice? Why the fuck do you care?”

“Because why the fuck is Aidoneus trying to get his dirty hands on someone from Gaia!?!?”

“I already told you I don’t know!!! You know how your father is!! He demands shit with little to no explanation!!”

Kendo breathes heavily, trying to calm himself down. He suddenly can hear his father’s snickers and laughs, as if he’s taunting his own son. His ears ring from the thunderous sound of his heartbeat. His eyes begin seeing stars twinkling around him. Kendo takes deep breaths and plays it off by using his hands to adjust his messy, onyx-black hair and pouts his lips as he huffs out, “Well, until you figure out why Pops wants Amethyst, I’m afraid you can’t get her, red velvet~” Without saying anything else, he transforms into a crow, releasing Pierre, and he flies towards the window that revealed Amethyst earlier.

Pierre immediately gets up and grabs out his bronze recorder again. He looks at Kendo flying in, knowing that he’s going to try and warn Amethyst of the danger. Pierre smirks and says to himself, “Fucking dumbass. If he was so worried about her, he shouldn’t have given back my recorder in the first place.” He moistens his lips and plants them onto the tip of the recorder, placing his fingers where they need to be. *My lord*, Pierre thinks to himself, *If the information you’ve given me is true...then she **should** be able to react to this tune just like any other animal in Umu.* He takes a deep breath, and he plays a playful but eerie tune that echoes throughout Spirit Realm.

## Chapter 24

### 40 years ago

“Anti... Welcome back...”

“Mhm...”

“Come on, son, talk to me! Talk to me about your ‘adventures’! What did you do this time? Who did you meet? What parties did you attend?”

“Don’t act like you care, Pops...”

“Oh? Well surely I must care if I ask, right?”

“Why the sudden switch up!? You said it yourself that I could go to Gaia as much as I wanted to!”

“That was before you stopped coming back home... I let it slide the first time because it was your first visit. We even agreed on you coming back after a certain amount of time. We agreed on a *schedule*... but then you broke it... You began to worry me...”

“Why do you care!? I’m not a fucking child anymore!! Keep Cerberus where he needs to be and not have him as my fucking babysitter!!”

“As your father, I have to make sure you’re safe, Anti. Gaia has its beauty, but it’s not a place to stay in for too long... not yet.”

“What are you talking about?”

“*Sighs* I feel like I’m repeating myself... but then again, pastors have to repeat themselves over and over again. So do pet owners. It’s the only way to learn...”

“Wow...”

“Son... That realm is filled with too much confusion. Humans wanting to be good, humans wanting to be bad. It’s splotchy. Needs to be fixed. Umu, *our home*, needs to become better. There’s always room for improvement. Ever since I came here, I made sure this world gained the

reputation it has now, and as my son, you will continue the legacy. *We* will continue the legacy *together*. And so...I was thinking...we bring Umu to Gaia. No light. No good. Only darkness.

Can you see it, son~?"

"..."

"It's going to take a lot of steps, but with dedication, it can be done. What do you think, son~?"

And don't answer immediately, take a few minutes to really think about this~"

"I think Gaia is perfectly fine."

"...Excuse me?"

"I think that Gaia is perfectly fine, Pops... It's beautiful...The humans are all their own shade of good and bad~."

"It's chaotic..."

"Yes...chaotic~ But how do you define 'chaotic'~? It's all about perception, and I love the different standpoints humans have to offer~ In order to create music, you have to use more than one note~...more than one instrument~ Use the same instrument to play just one note, and it becomes boring..."

"....."

"peonis all think the same...Malaikis all think the same...Humans however...there's always something different~ One human can say 'Fuck the world' while another human can say 'Let's make the world a better place'~! It's always a toss of a coin with them~! Let's not even forget about the other species that live within Gaia! Yes, Pops, I love doing hellish things in that realm, but I love to witness and do heavenly things too! Maza and Hell make Gaia~! But what's 'heaven' and what's 'hell'~!? Hahahaha~!! I want to see these humans live their life as they see fit~! I don't want to force them into the 'light' *or* into the 'darkness'~! I love them~!"

“.....”

“Hahaha...I love them...I love them? Love....Love? *huff...huff*....Is this what love is, Pops~? Is this what they mean when they say they ‘love’ something...or someone~!?”

“.....”

“Oh~...Ahahaha~! Oh my god~! I love humans~!! Yes~!! I love humans~!! I love love love love love LOVE them~!! Wow, this feels great to say~! I’m going to shout it to the rooftops~! I’m going back to Gaia and telling every human that I love them, and I will love their reaction no matter what it is~!! Wow...thank you, Pops~. You helped me learn something about myself~.”

“.....”

“Oh, and uh, to answer your question, no, I do not want to change Gaia. No, I don’t want to participate in whatever you got going on. And yes, you can call me an outcast...because that’s what I am and fucking proud of it~. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going back to my room. Later~.”

*Click clack click clack click clack!*

“...Like how lessons must be repeated...*Lessons must be taught in different ways as well...Morgana, I know you’re here....I know you heard that entire convo.* Looks like I’m going to be using the basement after all. It’ll just need some rearranging. Call up Nasir to have one of his greatest Artisans create a *special uniform* for Anti. Just tell them that Anti is a size medium. If they have any questions, have them call me...*I’ll do the rest...*”

...

## Present

Morgana holds a long piece of golden chain jewelry that is adorned with diamond droplets while Aidoneus looks at himself in the tall, black-framed mirror, adjusting his black tux. He grabs a golden pick comb and combs out his medium-sized afro. “Morgana,” he mutters, “my

horn jewelry, please...” Not letting out a peep, Morgana hands the jewelry she’s holding to him, and Aidoneus wraps the jewelry around his black horns, making sure that the diamonds hang, the dim light from his tall lamp bouncing against the gems. He straightens out his gold and platinum chains and necklaces that are bedazzled with rubies, orange sapphires, yellow topazes, emeralds, aquamarines, sapphires, and amethysts. He puts on his diamond cufflinks and he grabs a bottle of breath mint and sprays some in his mouth, revealing his fangs and long tongue.

Aidoneus gets closer to the mirror, looking into his own red-orange-yellow ombre eyes and slit pupils. Morgana, still standing behind him, says softly, “You look great, sir...”

Aidoneus says calmly, “Thank you,” as he caresses his hairless face, admiring his beauty and smiles widely, showing off his pearly white straight teeth. He pats his afro once more, making sure nothing is sticking out.

Morgana looks at the black and red checkerboard patterned carpet, and she looks back at her boss and squeaks out, “My Lord?”

“Yes, my dear?” Aidoneus turns to look at her with a soft smile.

Morgana adjusts her hair and glasses, and, avoiding eye contact, she looks at one of the burgundy red walls and says in a monotone voice, “The Quphantos have been invited, and they should be arriving soon.”

“Ah yes... Very good~” Aidoneus says cheerfully yet calmly, “But I feel like there’s *something else* you wanted to tell me...” After saying this, he gently grabs Morgana by her chin and leans closer to her, forcing her to look into his lifeless sunsets for eyes. Morgana’s heart pounds and her breath becomes unsteady. Her soul wants to revert back to its original form and try to escape the room because she knows that Aidoneus has figured out the source of his problems. She begins to whimper, and her lips start trembling from Aidoneus’ intense stare.



“What’s wrong, Morgana?” Aidoneus asks, keeping his calm smile and icy gaze, “You look as if *you’re guilty of something...*”

Morgana inhales and exhales her fears, and she whispers out, “*I’m sorry, Aidoneus...*”

“Hmmm? *I couldn’t hear you...*” he sneers through his smile.

“I-I’m sorry, Aidoneus...” Morgana whimpers.

“*Whatever do you mean, my dear? You’ve done nothing wrong~*” Aidoneus reassures her, seeing that tears are forming in her eyes, and he gently wipes them away.

“But it’s my fault! It’s because of *me* that Anti keeps running away! I’m the one that would help him out of his cell! I’m the one-”

“Shhhhh~ Sh sh shhhh~” Aidoneus plants his soft index finger onto Morgana’s plump lips, her whimpers muffled, and he says softly, “It’s okay, my dear~ You see, *I* should be the one apologizing. My reason behind choosing you to be the one to have access to everything involving Anti is because of how much he trusts you. He wouldn’t dare have me or anyone else near him...except you~ But I see that he’s been manipulating you into helping him with his selfish desires. I know that you were doing all of that out of ‘love’, but tell me dear...does he love you?”

“....No,” Morgana whines out.

“That’s right,” Aidoneus says, stepping away from her, allowing her to breathe. He continues, “He doesn’t. *You’re* a peoni. He’s addicted to *humans...* Gaians in general. He could care less about *you*. He’s *tainted*. He’s *lost*. And by helping him escape, *you* have *worsened* his condition.”

“I-I’m sorry, my Lord...”

“Everyone is a fool once, Morgana...even me. But I know that you know better now. I know that my way of handling things is extreme, but I assure you that they *will cure* Anti. You just have to trust me.”

“...Okay...”

“You want Anti to be by your side, do you not?” Aidoneus starts getting close to Morgana once more.

“Yes...”

“You ‘love’ him, don’t you?” He rests his hands on Morgana’s warm, rosy cheeks, keeping a gentle smile.

“Yes...”

***“Then do as I say...When Anti comes back, do not ever help him with his shenanigans, understand?”***

“Yes, sir...”

“Remember, my dear...He belongs to you...He belongs to you and only you. Like an expensive piece of jewelry, you must keep him protected and under your surveillance at all costs so that no thieves can take him away. You understand what I mean, right?” As he soothes her, he caresses her cheeks, looking deep into her eyes that become lifeless and dim. The more Aidoneus talks to her, the more cloudy her mind becomes. She can’t think of anything else now. Only Kendo.

“Yes, my Lord...”

“We will cure Anti, very soon~ We are only trying to help him~ He will learn to love being in Umu and being with ***you and only you***~ Repeat that in your head for me until the meeting begins, okay~?”

“Okay, sir...”

“Soon, you’ll be able to call me ‘Father’~”

“You mean... Anti and I will be...*together*?”

“Yes, my dear~ We’ll plan a cute little wedding when Anti comes back, okay~? With him, your world will be perfect~”

“My world...will be perfect...with him...”

“Yes~ He’s a *vital* piece to your puzzle and you *need* him to be complete~”

“I need him...to be complete...”

“Yes~ Now, if you’ll excuse me, *daughter-in-law*, I have to greet the newcomers now~ Go check on the chefs and see how they’re doing with the feast~”

“Okay...”

Ending the conversation, Aidoneus’ smile becomes more cheerful, and he gently moves Morgana’s hair from her face so that he can plant a kiss on her forehead. He walks out of the room and walks down the dark hallways, his smile becoming more menacing. He says to himself, “*Yes, Anti...You belong to me and only me...My world will be perfect with you...*”

## Chapter 25

July 2017

Evening

Amethyst looks out the window with her cup of tea, taking a deep breath of relaxation as she thinks back to the spa treatment she and the girls received today. “I should really do this more often,” she says calmly, taking a sip of her tea. She gazes at the sunset sky, seeing the dark clouds roll by, letting her know the possibility of rain.

Alexander walks into the bedroom, sees Amethyst, and hugs her from behind. Amethyst’s smile grows as her lover nuzzles into her sleek, black hair, taking in the soft scent of lilac.

Alexander says softly, “Soooo, you and the girls had fun?”

Amethyst giggles and responds, “Yes, we sure did. Hopefully, after this, the girls can finally relax and move on with their lives with a little more peace.”

“And hopefully *you* can relax more easily, too,” Alexander says, his hands now rubbing her stomach. “I’m serious, by the way, Amy...you really need to relax...”

“Alex, you’re acting as if I’m about to pop at any second now. I’m fine,” Amethyst says, shrugging Alexander off.

“I just don’t want you to do too much, that’s all, babe...”

“These bills aren’t going to pay themselves, Alex.”

“I know that, but I’m just saying now that you’re preggers, we should ease off on the stress a bit.”

Amethyst doesn’t say another word, and she walks to the bed and grabs her laptop, opening it up. She opens up her web browser, and she clicks on a site she bookmarked before. It’s a site filled with available jobs for her to take on. Alexander plops next to her to see that she’s looking for yet another task to complete. He lets out a heavy sigh and lays down, looking at the ceiling.

He then says, “Amy, maybe it’s time we find a *permanent* job...since you’re always about ‘paying bills’.”

“Unless you can find a job that doesn’t require a background check, I’m going to be doing this temp shit for a while,” Amethyst rebuttals.

“But...Amy, you haven’t done anything bad in the past,” Alexander says, tilting his head.

“Alex, you can’t be this dense,” Amethyst groans out.

“Whaaat?”

“I don’t have *anything* to check! No birth certificate, no ID, no SSN, no nothing! They wouldn’t find me anywhere in whatever database they look into!”

“Oh come on, Amy, Mwezi took care of all of that for us, remember?” After saying this Alexander gets up and goes to their closet. Amethyst’s long ears twitch from Mwezi’s name being said, and she rolls her eyes. Alexander grabs out a safe and says, “Tada~! I put all of our important documents in here~!”

“Alex, there’s a chance for the humans to discover all of that being *fake*. The only way for us to have a permanent job is if the people hiring us are *also* in the mythical department, and by far, this temp website is the closest we’ll get to that.”

“Huh.... so that’s why Mwezi chose April 1st as our birthdays...”

Amethyst looks away from her laptop screen to look at her lover holding up their fake birth certificates, seeing that Usiku’s father put April 1, 1977 as their birthdates. He even notices how their ‘full names’ are ‘Alexander White’ and ‘Amethyst Black’. Amethyst’s face scrunches up at the sight of the documents and goes back to her laptop, hissing out, “Mwezi was never the creative type...”

“HmMMM, I think it was pretty creative!” Alexander says, letting out a little chuckle, “It’s simple...but creative!”

“...I’d ask you to explain, but it would just make my head pound even more,” Amethyst complains.

“Oh come on, you gotta give Mwezi just a *little* more credit! April 1st? April Fool’s? 1977? His favorite number is 7? Alexander White and Amethyst Black? Come on, do I even have to explain that one?” Alexander chuckles some more.

Amethyst groans, “Ugh, I don’t even know why we even bother asking him for all of that shit...”

“Just in case we ever get into any sticky situation. Amy, Mwezi isn’t perfect, but he at least made sure we were straight with everything...”

“The only reason he helped us out was because we were looking for his son.”

“W-Well... Y-Yeah, *buuuut* we were also his friends!”

“Key word ‘*were*’...”

“Come ooon, I mean he made sure we had enough money to get this apartment-....oh my god...Oh my god that’s it!!” Alexander puts the documents back into the safe and puts the safe back in the closet, and he goes to his nightstand to grab his notebook and purple pen. He opens to a fresh page and begins writing quietly.

Amethyst looks at Alexander, confused as to what he has planned. She asks, “Alex, what are you doing?” However, Alexander doesn’t respond, letting his pen do the talking. *Scribble scribble scribble scribble!* “Alex?” *Scribble scribble scribble.* “*Sighs* Never mind. I’ll look into these jobs later. I should check on the girls. Rose first. She said she left her phone, so I’ll call Tenacity’s number.” She closes her laptop, gets up from the bed, and grabs her phone. She goes

through her contacts to look for Tenacity's number. After the spa treatment, Amethyst treated the girls to something to eat, and they managed to give her their numbers then. She gets to Tenacity's contact and touches it, but before she can tap the 'call' option, a crow appears inside the bedroom, flying frantically. *CAW!! CAW CAW!!* The screeches of the crow startle Alexander and Amethyst, making them gasp. "Oh my god!! How did that get in here!?" Amethyst exclaims.

"I-I dunno!!" Alexander responds, trying to find something to lead the bird out. Amethyst immediately opens the window, and she looks back to see the crow landing on top of their television.

"*GUYS! IT'S ME!*" the crow speaks. Immediately, everything stops moving. They recognize that voice. They know that playful sound.

"Kendo?" Amethyst says, taking deep breaths and walking towards the crow, seeing that the crow has red-orange-yellow ombre eyes.

"Ooooh no! Not you!" Alexander says now enraged, summoning a sphere of scorching hot water, sounds of the water boiling filling the room. "What the hell are *you* doing here!?"

Kendo flies off the television and immediately transforms back into his human form. Alexander wastes no time approaching Kendo, but Kendo puts his hands forward, trying to keep some space between them. "Wait a minute! Wait a minute! I'm not here to fuck with you today, vanilla bean," Kendo reassures Alexander, but the angered Upendelaiki keeps his boiling water sphere ready. The chaotic Upindeoni-human hybrid looks at Amethyst and says, "You need to get out of here, quick. Pierre is here, and he is not wasting time!"

"Huh?" Amethyst vocalizes, "What are you talking about?"

Before Kendo can explain, music plays outside; the music is played by a recorder and in a minor key. Kendo and Alexander immediately look towards the opened window where the music

can be heard. However, Amethyst looks at the two confused. “What is it?” she asks. She looks at the direction they’re looking, but she doesn’t see nor hear what they’re seeing or hearing. She looks back at them, her face scrunched up. “Seriously, what is going on with you two?”

“...Holy shit....It’s not working!” Kendo exclaims.

“What’s not working!?” Amethyst yells, her heart pounding from the anxiety building up.

Not wasting any more time, Alexander makes his water sphere disappear and walks towards Amethyst, and he rests his hands on her arms. “You stay here, okay?” Alexander pleads, “I’ll go take care of this.” He then looks at Kendo with irritation showing in his face. “And *you*,” he says to Kendo, “***When I get back, you better be gone...***” He then runs out of the room, and he zooms down the stairs to exit the building.

Kendo looks at the door where Alexander exited with a stoic face and says to himself, “Wow...I helped you, bozo. A ‘thank you’ would have been sweeter...”

Amethyst looks at Kendo and runs towards him. “Kendo, what happened just now!?! What did you and Alex see o-or hear!?”

Kendo looks at Amethyst and notices how on edge she is. Even though he’s only known her for barely a month now, he’s always seen her relaxed and focused. Not once has he thought that he would see stress overwhelm her like this. Her behavior isn’t helping his own anxiety. Having to calm down Amethyst while also trying to process the new information he learned from Pierre is just making his thoughts scramble like an egg and his heart cry out of agony. He tries to breathe, and as he tries to gather his own self, he says, “Amy, we need to get out of here. Pierre screwed up this time, but next time we might not be so lucky.” He immediately grabs for her hand and they run out of the apartment.



Before they go anywhere, Amethyst locks the door, and they go down the hallway, trying to reach for the exit. She asks again, “Okay, but what is Pierre doing?”

Making sure that no one can hear them, he says softly, “Pierre is trying to use that damn recorder of his and mesmerize you to follow him back to Umu.”

“What!?” Amethyst exclaims quietly.

“He must have thought that you would still hear him if he was in Spirit Realm, but thankfully that’s not the case. Hehe, I mean duh, you’re an Gaian,” Kendo reassuringly says, trying to convince himself that the theory that’s running laps around his brain is completely false and that his father is just off his rocker as usual.

“Wait a minute....But why?! Why does he want me!?”

“Trust me, chocolate kiss, that’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

As they go down the stairs, Amethyst’s head begins to bang. She starts thinking about everything, and trying to piece everything together. She knows that when this first started, she was a target along with Kendo. However, trying to figure out the ‘why’ behind it all only pushes Amethyst closer to the edge. Kendo holts her train of thought and says, “Hey, we need to lay low somewhere for a while. Somewhere that’s *not* where Pierre knows about. Hmmm, lemme think...”

Amethyst thinks about the places she and Pierre have seen each other: the forest, Usiku and Delilah’s house, and Alexander and her apartment. They should most likely avoid Tenacity’s apartment as well since she’s nearby. Then, she asks, “Where do Jacqueline and Nermal live?”

A light bulb goes crazy in Kendo’s mind and he says, “Ouuu, good idea~! They’re actually *far* from here~! Think you can keep up~?” They walk out of the complex, and Kendo transforms

into a black and white cat. Amethyst follows his lead and transforms into her black cat form, and they run together for what seems like forever.

Meanwhile, Alexander stands outside, still in Gaia, walks towards Pierre, who is still in Spirit Realm, and Pierre notices the Upendelaiki approaching. Pierre's pupils begin to shrink, wondering what Alexander is going to do since they are out in the open and are in two different realms; humans could be looking out of their window right now, and they'll see only Alexander, doing whatever he's going to do. Even though Pierre's nerves are tangling up and creating knots, he takes deep breaths, trying to acknowledge the fact that Alexander is pretty much stuck. Now that he thinks about the last time they were in this predicament, he thought that Alexander couldn't see or hear him in the Spirit Realm. However, Alexander stares right at him, his angered ocean-blue eyes burning Pierre's soul. The Upindeoni can take this opportunity to escape and try to catch up to Amethyst, but his curiosity stops him and his eyes want to witness what Alexander is going to do.

*He's lucky it isn't night time, Alexander thinks to himself, Otherwise, I'd have already taken care of this without worrying about humans witnessing me traveling between realms.* Alexander keeps his eyes on Pierre, knowing that whoever is watching the Upendelaiki is most likely thinking that he's either just deep in thought or is on some sort of drug. Thoughts run through his mind, rushing to find a way to at least signal Pierre to back off. Suddenly an idea begins to stand proudly as if it is a superhero, and Alexander's heart and mind leap with joy. *Amethyst did say to check on those two,* Alexander thinks to himself. He immediately takes out his phone, goes to Delilah's contact, and calls her. He puts the phone close to his long ear, listening to the dial tone. *Riiiiiiiiing! Riiiiiiiiing! Riiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing!*

*"Hello?"*

“Delilah~!” Alexander says cheerfully, a smile growing on his face, but his chilling eyes are still dead-set on Pierre.

*“Oh, Alex~! Hi, honey~! How are you doing today?”*

“Oh I’m doing alright. How are you?”

*“Oh, ya know, just making it. Some shit went down the other day, and...um...”*

“...Are you okay, Dee?”

*“Yeah, uh... **sniffles** Sorry, just...a lot is going on, and....I’m just...”*

“...”

*“I’m just praying that everything will just get better, ya know?”*

Alexander’s smile instantly disappears after hearing Delilah’s sorrowful tone, and it only makes Alexander’s gut tense up more knowing the reason why she’s having a hard time holding it together. Attempting to be a good friend, Alexander says, “Hey, I understand. Look, if it will bring any ease, Rose has been with her friends ever since, and from what I’ve been hearing from Amy, she’s doing okay.”

*“If you or Amy ever talk to her again, could you tell her to call me when she can?”*

...***Whimpers...***”

“Of course, Dee...”

*“She doesn’t have to come back home, but I want to at least hear her voice...!”*

Delilah’s wails become stronger and stronger and Alexander’s heart plummets; Pierre can hear the desolate woman, and even though the negative emotion she’s experiencing rushes through him like a dose of dopamine, he tries to contain himself, not wanting his evil nature to piss off his natural enemy. “Of course, Delilah,” Alexander says, clearing his throat to push away the tough lump of empathy, “...I will as soon as possible. Please don’t cry...”

*“I’m sorry!! It’s just that...That fucking dumbass, Shandon, fucked up everything, Alex!! This family is in complete shambles now because of him!!...But...Usiku is going to try to talk to him tomorrow, so...sighs I’m just hoping this shit gets fixed soon sniffles...”*

“Yeah...me too...I heard what happened through Rose...and if I can be honest, Delilah...this sadly isn’t the first time two Nruku relatives fought like this...to the point that other people’s lives are in jeopardy...”

*“Ugh, come on Alex, don’t do this to me. You’re saying this is some generational shit? And you **witnessed** it?”*

“Sadly, yes...and unfortunately, I don’t think Usiku knows about all of the details, either...”

*“Well **that’s** new...”*

“Honestly, I don’t know exactly how much Usiku has told you *or* how much he knows. I wish he would have told me and Amy, though...about all that’s happened to him here...”

*“I understand... He left me in the dark for a long while before finally opening up to me. You guys were there for him in his childhood, I’m sure he’ll feel comfortable to tell you all, soon.”*

“Yeah, just gotta give him time. I think that after Usiku and Shandon deal with their long-time rivalry, things will get back on track, and we all can finally unpack and learn more about each other in a more peaceful way.”

*“I hope so, Alex...”*

Even though the conversation and constant flow of despair and gloom entices Pierre, the anxiety from sensing Amethyst’s presence becoming faint immediately knocks him back into reality and back to Mission Mode. While still keeping eye contact with Alexander, he boldly attempts to make a swift exit by taking a few quiet steps back, about to take flight, but Alexander

immediately says, “Well hey, listen. I guess we all got some shit going on. After Amy and I tell Rose to call you, we’re gonna lay low for a bit.”

*“Really?? W-Why?”*

“Because it seems that *some* people just don’t know when to quit...” As soon as he says this, Alexander sneers at Pierre, letting Pierre know that he’s shifted the topic and talking about him.

*“Oh god, is that peoni still trying to get Amy!?”*

“Yeah, but don’t worry, I’m going to make sure that he *never* gets to her, and if he even gets a yard close to her, he’s gonna have to put up with a *lot* of shit coming from me...”

*“You better give him hell, Alex!”*

“Of course! Why do you think I took all of those *nunchuk* classes?”

*“Hmhmhm~! I’m so glad that Amy is with a guy like you~ sighs Well, do whatever you can to create some distance from that bastard, okay? And if that means not talking to me for a while, then so be it.”*

“Don’t worry, Dee. We won’t have to do that. I’ll keep you updated on what’s going on.”

*“Okay! Well hey, thank you for calling me. I really needed to talk to someone while Usi was asleep. My poor baby fell asleep earlier than usual...”*

“No problem! We’ll talk again real soon, okay?”

*“Alrighty~! I’ll be sure to tell Usi you said hey~! Buh-bye now~!”*

“Bye bye!” *Boop!* The call ends, and Alexander puts his phone back in his pocket, taking in a deep breath. He looks at Pierre and he says through his gritted teeth, “***Now get the fuck out of here, Pierre. I’m not telling you again...***” Not saying anything else to him, Alexander turns around and walks back to his apartment, expecting to see his beautiful lover waiting for him.

Pierre watches the fired up Upendelaiki make his exit, and his mouth naturally curves into a smirk, and a snicker escapes. “Stupid Upendelaiki,” Pierre says to himself out loud, “He’s in for a rude awakening when he sees that she’s not there. Not her or Kendo...Now to look for them...” He summons his leathery wings and takes flight. As he tunes into his ability to sense an animal’s presence, he mutters out, “She couldn’t have gone far...Her *and* that meddling brat are going to Umu with me by the end of this.”

## Chapter 26

July 2017

Night

Nermal and Jacqueline relax on Jacqueline's white, satin bed, playing a game of Secure 4. Nermal drops her yellow iridescent piece and makes a row of four diagonally. "Aha~! Beat you again," Nermal teases as she tallies up the number of wins they have so far, and she sees that she's in the lead.

"Uugh, no fair!!" Jacqueline whines, "You're always finding a way to throw me off!"

"Hey, it's not my fault that you set it up for me, silly~!" Nermal giggles.

Jacqueline huffs out, "Whatever, I want a rematch," as she leans off of her bed to reach the trash can underneath her crystal-clear nightstand, and she throws away her crumpled up McDonald's bag. She sits back up and adjusts her straight, white hair that flows down her back, no pigtails this time around.

Nermal moves the slider under the game board to release the yellow-iridescent and red-iridescent chips. *Clickity-clickity-clank!* As Jacqueline and Nermal pick up their respective pieces, Nermal's face transitions from serene happiness to subtle anxiety, and she asks Jacqueline, "Hey, Jackie...so...What are you gonna do about college? Since...you know, *that* happened..."

Jacqueline continues picking up her red pieces, and she says with a calm tone, "I'll still try to go...but I'm gonna try and live somewhere else."

Nermal lets out a soft gasp, not expecting Jacqueline to still want to leave after the confrontation they've had. "I mean," Nermal starts softly, "You're...not going anywhere far, are you...?"

"Nope," Jacqueline answers as she finishes collecting her pieces, "I'm gonna see if either my aunt or uncle will let me live with them."

“But aren’t they somewhere in Texas?” Nermal asks, tilting her head as she plops down her first piece into the board. *Clank!*

“Yep. Which is why I’m getting my shit out of here before school starts,” Jacqueline explains, and she places her piece next to Nermal’s. *Clink!*

“...” *Clank!*

“That way, dad can’t watch over me like Big Brother. He’ll have no reason to. I’ll be living on campus, and the house that I’m going to when it’s vacation time won’t be this one.” *Clink!*

“...” *Clank!*

“I already know what you’re thinking. Don’t worry, I’ll come to visit you, NeeNee...just not here.” *Clink!*

“...”

“...NeeNee? C’mon, it’s your turn.”

“That’s not fair, Jacqueline...”

Jacqueline instantly rolls her eyes and groans out, “Please don’t do this now. We already know why I’m doing this. Besides, *at least* I’m still seeing you along with our other besties and not, like, completely abandoning y’all like I was about to do.”

“Okay, but still Jackie!! You’re not gonna be here majority of the time!! I’ll just be by myself!!”

“Well you can blame ‘daddy dearest’ for that shit!! Douchebag shouldn’t have said what he said at the dinner table!!”

Nermal looks at Jacqueline with vexation spilling all over her face. She feels as if they’re back to square one. She thought that despite the problems that erupted yesterday, Jacqueline



wouldn't try to go anywhere for a while. But alas, everything is now on a timer as Jacqueline tries to find a new place to be herself stress-free.

"Uuuh, is this a bad time?" The two girls jolt from the masculine voice. They look around to find the owner of the voice, and Jacqueline sees a black and white cat approaching them even though the door was closed.

Jacqueline lets out a squeal of surprise and she whines, "Who let a fucking cat in here!?"

Piecing the voice and the cat together, Nermal recognizes who the mysterious visitor is, and she waves her hands in front of Jacqueline to calm her down and says, "Wait wait! Relax, Jackie! It's Kendo!" She gets off the bed to approach Kendo and grab him. She gives him a quick hug, enjoying the feel of his soft, plush fur, and Kendo's furry tail sways back and forth as he purrs and nuzzles Nermal's cheek. Nermal gently places Kendo on top of the bed, and she sits next to him and asks, "Ken, what are you doing here? Is everything okay?"

Kendo looks around nervously, trying to let the ivory white walls that have pictures of Jacqueline and Nermal's memories and posters of celebrities they like calm him down, but his heart rushes him to get the situation at hand settled. He looks back at Nermal, whose light yellow topazes for eyes sparkle out of curiosity and concern, and he answers her questions with, "Uuuuh, yeah??" It's as if Nermal can read Kendo's face as she doesn't say anything and the worry on her face only becomes more apparent. He lets out an exhausted sigh and says, "Okay okay, no, everything is not okay. Can Amethyst and I stay here for like.....until Pierre goes away?"

Jacqueline's and Nermal's eyes widen together and they exclaim, "HUH!?!"

"I know I know! BIG favor! HUGE favor," Kendo says, waving his paw around as he talks, "But please, just let us lay low here until I can figure out our next move."

Even though Jacqueline is still processing the fact that Kendo infiltrated the mansion so easily, she says without hesitation, “HmMMMM, okay sure why not!”

“Alri- Wait, that fast?” Kendo asks, puzzled.

“Well,” Jacqueline explains while adjusting herself, “I could care less about this house right now or the people in it besides NeeNee.” Nermal chooses to stay silent, not wanting to go back and forth with Jacqueline again. “The only rule from me is that y'all stay out of sight so that my dad has no other reason to bitch at me.”

“You got yourself a deal. Amy is in the other room. I'll go ahead and get her.” Swaying his tail happily, Kendo prances into the Spirit Realm and fazes through the closed door to get Amethyst.

Jacqueline and Nermal look at the area where Kendo was standing until he ‘disappeared’, Jacqueline scratches her head and looks at Nermal, and she asks, “How the fuck did they even get in here??”

“HmMMMM,” Nermal ponders as she taps her chin, “Maybe through Spirit Realm?? That’s what he did just now, and that’s how he got in here the last time.”

“LAST TIME!?!”

“Oops! U-Uh yeeeah, he was here earlier. Hehehehehe....” Nermal laughs nervously, a bead of sweat trickles down the side of her forehead. Jacqueline looks at her in complete shock, now having to process that Kendo has been here before. As soon as she is about to ask her adopted sister more questions, *BOOOM!! Rumble rumble rumble!* Thunder says its disturbing hello’s, making the two ladies squeal and hold each other tightly, while heavy drops of melancholy, strain, and anticipation begin to fall, some of the drops splattering onto the windows. The thunderstorm fills the room’s silence as the two ladies try to slow their hammering hearts. They

let go of each other, and Nermal gets off the bed to grab her phone. “I guess we should tell the others what’s up, right?” Nermal asks as she goes to the group chat.

“Yeah,” Jacqueline agrees, “Maybe they can even come over and spend the night since this is sort of an emergency! Although I doubt MeeMee will come along...”

“Ooh!! Good idea!” Nermal cheers, and she immediately starts texting in the group chat.

Meanwhile, Kendo and Amethyst, in their human forms, walk through the enormous living room, amazed by how bright it is despite the thunderstorm turning everything dark outside. Amethyst notices a family picture in the middle of the coffee table, and gently grabs it to examine the people in the frame. Jacqueline, the little girl wearing two moon-white pigtails and a yellow frilly dress, and Nermal, the little girl wearing a low mahogany-red bun and a white frilly dress covered in rainbow polka-dots, make silly faces at the camera causing their mother to laugh, her bright teeth and hair like sun rays bringing more light and warmth into the picture; Jacqueline’s father, though an ounce of frustration shows within his eyebrows, holds a gentle, thin smile that keeps the serene aura emitting from the picture alive and not disturbed. Kendo notices the silent woman gazing at the picture, and he interrupts her by saying, “Cute picture, ain’t it?”

Amethyst slightly jumps from Kendo’s question, but then she instantly puts on a soft smile and says, “They are adorable...”

“Yeeah,” Kendo says while glancing at the picture, “I bet you that this was their fifth or sixth attempt at getting a ‘good’ picture.”

“Hmhmhmhm~ Probably,” Amethyst giggles out.

Kendo laughs with her as he walks off and starts walking up the stairs. Amethyst lightly places the picture back onto the coffee table, and she follows Kendo upstairs. “Sooooo,” Kendo says, “Are you and vanilla bean gonna take a lot of family pics when the baby comes~?”

“H-Huh!?” Amethyst stammers, her face heating up, “I-I mean yes, but...How did you know that I was...?”

“Pregnant? C’mon, chocolate kiss, I’m half-Upindeoni~ You know we spiritual beings can sense these things,” Kendo explains.

“*Sigh*... Fair enough, but can you not tell the girls about it...?”

“If they haven’t figured it out already? Sure thing~”

“Thank you... I already have *one* person trying to treat me like I can’t do much, and he’s enough.”

“Well, I mean, being preggers is a huge thing...literally. The last thing that anyone wants to happen is the mom and baby getting harmed somehow.”

“I’ve only been pregnant for 2 months.”

“Yeeah, but liiiike you were over here tryin’ to throw hands with some Umu mofos, and that alone is a life-death situation. You were lucky that you were fighting someone that had control over themselves...*and had gone through a reset thanks to Usiku*...”

“And all of this is happening... because of us...”

“.....More on me, but yeah...”

“...”

“...Anyway! So uh, Jackie and Nermal are in here, and they said we can crash here for a bit. You can go in, I’m going to uh...be someplace else.” As soon as he finishes his sentence, Kendo leaves Amethyst in front of Jacqueline’s bedroom door and walks back to the stairs.

“Someplace else... meaning?” Amethyst asks, watching the hybrid leave in a hurry.

“Um...the pool~ I saw that the Brookes’ family got a big ass pool in the back~! Gonna go take a swim~” Kendo says cheerfully, plastering a smile on his face. Not allowing Amethyst a chance to ask any more questions, he rushes down the stairs.

Amethyst watches Kendo disappear and looks at Jacqueline’s smooth, white door, and taking a deep breath, she gently knocks on the door. *Knock knock knock knock*. A few seconds later, the door opens to reveal Jacqueline, and her smile widens as she sees Amethyst. “Amy~!!” she squeals, and she pulls her into a firm embrace. Amethyst returns the hug, and Nermal joins in.

“Aawwww, hello ladies,” Amethyst greets them, “I know we just saw each other, but I’m glad that you two are okay-” Suddenly, a huge flash of light blinds the three ladies, making Nermal gasps softly, and then *BOOM!!! Rumble rumble rumble rumble RUMBLE rumble!!* The thunder interrupts Amethyst and causes her to let out a loud squeak while Jacqueline and Nermal scream again, holding onto Amethyst much more tightly. Amethyst holds them, understanding their unbearable fear. She continues, “Well, it’s a good thing I’m here now...*especially* since this storm wants to be a nuisance...” Then suddenly, it hits her. It’s storming, and Kendo is going outside to the pool. Her eyes widen and slit pupils contract. *Is he insane!?* Amethyst asks herself, *Why is he going out there when it’s looking hideous out there!?*

“Hey, where did Kendo go?” Nermal asks, letting go of Amethyst and walking into the hallway to look around.

“Oh,” Amethyst responds, “He went outside, to the pool, he said.”

“What the fuck? Why?” Jacqueline asks, her face scrunching up and head tilting to the side in perplexion.

“My guess is just as good as yours, my dear,” Amethyst huffs out of exhaustion.

“HMMMMM,” Nermal hums out. Curiosity begins to nudge Nermal more and more, motivating her to go find her new friend and check on him. However, the thunderstorm’s visitation makes her heart quiver in terror. Despite her heart and brain running all over the place, she says, “I’ll go ahead and check on him,” and she walks to the stairs.

“Um, NeeNee, are you sure?” Jacqueline asks, “It’s, like, raining cats and dogs out there!!”

“I know!” Nermal says, “But... Well, something is telling me I should at least check if he’s okay! Besides, this isn’t the first time I’m outside in the middle of a storm, heehee!” Nermal’s reassurance doesn’t settle Jacqueline’s and Amethyst’s nerves.

“Well... just come back soon, okay?” Amethyst requests, “Even if he decides to stay outside, leave him be and come back inside...”

“Okay, I will!” Nermal says with a soft smile, and she runs down the stairs. As she goes down the stairs, she yells, “Also, I checked the group chat, the rest of the team are supposed to be coming over soon!!”

“EVEN MEEMEE!? I’m surprised she’s stepping out of the house in this weather!!” Jacqueline yells back.

“*Sighs* As much as I want to scold them to go back to their homes...I’m sure they’re on the road by now,” Amethyst exhales, walking to Jacqueline’s window, watching the rain water the trees and grass while cleaning the many cars that the Brookes Family owns. Meanwhile, Jacqueline decides to check the messages she missed in the group chat.

**Tenacity:** *Hey, this is Rose texting. Has anyone seen Kendo lately?*

**Nermal:** *Well, last time I saw him, he actually visited our house! Why? 🙄🙄*

**Tenacity:** *Issei, Tee, and I are on the way. If you see Kendo again, try to keep him from disappearing again, okay?*

**Nermal:** *Oh! Okay! Is everything okay, though?* 😞

**Tenacity:** *Issei found some info on Kendo's dad, and it's not good.*

**Melissa:** *Screw this, I'm coming over there, too. Dad can just bitch at me later.*

**Tenacity:** *Be careful, MeeMee* 😓

**Nermal:** *Aren't you afraid of driving in a storm, MeeMee!?* 😞😓

**Melissa:** *I'm scared shitless, but if you guys are about to get into some action, I want to be a part of it!* 😓 *But I promise, this is the only time I'm doing this.*

**Tenacity:** *If you want us to, I can tell Tee to come pick you up* 😞

**Melissa:** *No!! It's fine! Dad already feels some type of way about me not talking to him earlier, I don't need him to try to shit on y'all, too. Besides...I feel like a rebel* 🐱

**Nermal:** *Well, get here safely, rebel!* 💕 *I'll keep an eye out for you guys!*

**Nermal:** *Update!! Kendo and Amethyst are here right now! Hurry hurry!* 🚨

Jacqueline looks at the time of these text messages and sees that they were not too long ago. *Oh shiiiiit*, she thinks to herself, *they should be here at any second then! Although the storm might slow them down...*

“So... Your family enjoys living in the middle of the forest, Jacqueline,” Amethyst asks, interrupting her train of thought.

Jacqueline puts down her phone to close her door and plops back onto her bed, disturbing the game her and Nermal were playing earlier. As she stretches, she strains out, “Yeeah, since they're practically celebs, they like to keep shit secret.”

“I see. That's understandable,” Amethyst says, still watching the night showers, the mansion's porch lights sharing their orange-yellow rays. “Are your parents here by any chance?” she asks.

“Nope, and they’re not coming back for another month or so,” Jacqueline answers while rolling her peridot-green eyes, “Knowing them, they will probably try to come back before school starts. But I won’t be here by the time they get back.”

“Hm? Why not?” Amethyst asks, her eyes going from outside to Jacqueline.

“Because my dad is being a bitch, has been a bitch since I turned 14, so to get away from his bullshit, I’m moving out,” Jacqueline announces, making Amethyst’s heart skip a beat. Even though they haven’t known each other long enough for Jacqueline’s actions to have much of an impact on her like they do with Nermal, to hear Jacqueline’s plan leaves Amethyst pondering what’s really been going on behind these mansion walls; it only makes her more inquisitive since the family picture she saw in the living room told her a different story. She didn’t bother asking any of the girls about their current situations while they were at the spa (because knowing Rose’s situation was already hard enough for her to stomach), but now so many questions hover over her head: What kind of parents does Jacqueline truly have? Are they anything like Usiku and Delilah? What kind of conflicts did this rich family have that has been disrupting the peace for what now seems like a long while? And what could Jacqueline’s father have done that would leave Jacqueline feeling like she has to get away from the hometown she seemed to have enjoyed for all of her life?

The awkward and dense atmosphere along with the thunderstorm not booming like it was earlier, as if nature didn’t have anything left to say, tightens up Amethyst’s throat, so she clears it up to try and change the subject. She sees that Jacqueline has a mauve-purple bean bag and rests herself on it, letting her body sink. She looks at the ceiling and asks, “So how do you think Rose is doing...?”



“...I don’t know... apparently she decided to go back to TeeTee’s apartment after our hangout,” Jacqueline says, tracing random lines on her linen with her long fingernail.

“Really...?” Amethyst responds, feeling her head instantly shift gears and wonder what Rose is thinking. “Well... her family situation isn’t really peaches and cream either...”

“Yeah... I don’t think any of us are doing okay... except for Tee,” Jacqueline complains.

“Well, to be fair, she doesn’t live with her parents like the rest of you do, so I’m sure she would be experiencing some sort of frustrations as well if she had to be under a watchful eye,” Amethyst throws into the conversation.

“Hmm... that is true. Her parents aren’t as strict as MeeMee’s, but they made sure Tee went to them first for just about anything...Huh... I should ask her.”

“Ask her what, dear?”

“If she was still living with her mom and dad, would they be on her about getting into this crazy ass adventure...”

“Hm... If they were the proper parents, I’m sure they would be worried. She would still be under their care, after all, so of course they would have to react one way or another.”

“That’s true...Uuuugghhh, but parents can be so wack with how they ‘react’ to certain scenarios.”

“... Jackie... I know that I don’t know the full story about what’s going on with you and your parents... same with Melissa... but I believe that once you have kids... you’ll understand why it can be so difficult to let them go and be out of your sight...”

“Do *you* know what it’s like to be a parent?”

“...I do...”

“...???”

“...”

“Um, excuse me, ma’am!! Don’t leave me hangin’!! What do you mean you do!?”

“...Jacqueline, you have to promise me that you won’t say anything to the others, okay...?”

When all of this is over, I want to be the first to tell Rose this...”

“Huh? O-Okay, sure!” Jacqueline thought that Amethyst was going to finally confess that she was pregnant; however, she sees that the black cat has something else to tell, and the pale beauty decides to stay quiet and take in the information that Amethyst is about to spill.

Amethyst adjusts herself and gathers the proper words she’s about to say, not wanting to reveal every detail to Jacqueline. She takes a breath and says, “...Usiku...Rose’s father was my first child... I had to babysit him while his parents were... busy. They... were a rich family, just like yours. Whenever his parents couldn’t be around, Alex and I took their place. We made sure that we did everything we could to make sure that Usiku had gotten the love and attention that he needed to grow. We thought we were doing everything right... We were becoming the parents that Usiku didn’t have... the parents that Usiku *needed*... We vowed to never leave his side... to forever give him a place where he can be comfortable and never have to experience hurt... I was about to adopt him and everything... I had already started claiming him to be my son... And as soon as I came back from getting the papers ready for his parents to sign... I got word that Usiku was gone....”

“Whoa... Oh Amy....”

“Jacqueline...” Water filled with salty regret and bitter grievance begins to form in Amethyst’s eyes, but she bites her lip to try and fight back, breathing heavily through her nose. With an unstable voice, she continues, “There’s a reason why all of your parents are being the

way that they are... Because they are afraid of the possibility of you getting lost... of you getting hurt... of you forgetting who truly had your back from the beginning...”

“...” Jacqueline sees Amethyst fighting through her words, and she contemplates if she should even share her opinion on the matter. Although Jacqueline understands where her mythical friend is coming from, she really wants to tell Amethyst that her and Usiku’s situations are completely different. After Rose explained what Usiku had told her, Jacqueline knew that Usiku was taken away at a very young age, so Usiku had no chance at having the ‘proper’ family Amethyst wanted to give him. However, Jacqueline is stepping into adulthood and about to start college. At this point, parents should be letting loose and trust that their children will be okay, or at least that’s what Jacqueline believes should be happening. But alas, Melissa’s and her parents are still trying to find some way to firmly grasp onto them to the point that they can’t spread their wings and take flight. Jacqueline wants to rekindle the courage she had against her father and use it here to talk to Amethyst about why a parent can become so overprotective that they begin to do irrational things; however, seeing Amethyst becoming emotional over what could have been, she decides to get up from where she is, walks up to Amethyst, and hugs her tightly, and Amethyst returns the affection, her body begins to shake rapidly as intense sniffles and whimpers begin to escape.

Jacqueline rubs Amethyst’s warm back, trying to show that she sympathizes with her, and immediately she thinks about Amethyst being pregnant, and she says, “Well, hey, look at it this way! At least you’re pregnant, right? Now you can be the parent that you wanted to be for Rose’s dad for someone else~! So all of that time you spent with him won’t go to waste~!”

Amethyst whimpers out, “I-I know, but... Wait a minute...” She disconnects from Jacqueline, looks at her with a puffy face and red eyes flooding with tears, and she says, “How do you know I’m pregnant!?”

*Oh shit*, Jacqueline says to herself, as she just realizes that she snitched on herself. Her brain scrambles to find a good excuse, but she only says, “...Um... Oh... Uuuh... Hehe... Whoopsie...”

“Ugh,” Amethyst rolls her eyes and wipes the tears away, and clearly says, “Whatever, look, just don’t go telling the girls, okay?”

“... They know too, Amy... Hehehehe...” Jacqueline laughs nervously.

“.....WHAT!?”

## Chapter 27

“Hello, newcomers~! Congratulations on leaving your disgusting, fleshy, forever incomplete and flawed vessels and leading yourself to darkness! Your instincts told you that you belonged here, and guess what? Your instincts were correct~. If you can’t tell already, I am Aidoneus, CEO of Umu~ It is because of me that Umu is the realm that it is today in this universe, and you lovely peonis and Upindeonis are going to make it much lovelier~. I don’t like long speeches myself, so I’ll keep it short and sweet. As part of Umu, your duty is to, of course, keep darkness alive and strong and spread it to Gaia when you can~ This realm and Gaia are your playground~ Have fun~ Toy with these humans, ***break them down to the point they feel like darkness is all that’s left.*** And whether they become the Fallen or another one of us, you are making Umu a better place regardless~. Speaking of the Fallen, those of you who are Upindeonis are responsible for not only doing your evil deeds but also working with me or the other Quphantos if you are interested, and keeping the Fallen where they need to be... in the Pits, suffering for all eternity until Ubokufa decides to rescue them...ugh, *can’t stand when he does that.* Anyway, enough business chatter, you’ll learn along the way. Go~! Prosper~! Have fun~! My only rule is to cause havoc~! Thank you all for giving me a chance to meet you all~. You are very much appreciated~. Welcome home~!”

The newcomer-peonis applaud their leader’s speech, clinging onto every silky word that slithers out of his smooth, satin lips. Their eyes are held hostage by Aidoneus’ youthful, amber brown skin, his red-orange-yellow ombre jewels for eyes, and his perfectly round afro glisten against the chandeliers’ warm light that shares the same hue as a sun. The jewels that dance upon his necklaces, horn jewelry, and cufflinks along with the shimmying of his gold and platinum chains as Aidoneus stands at his throne in front of his people in open arms make him look like an important statue adorned with beautiful decorations.

Aidoneus gives his followers a few more seconds to fill their eyes with adulation, lust, and/or envy from staring at him, and he leaves the throne room gracefully, letting the tour guides escort the newcomers out of the castle and to the center of Umu where they can start their new lives as Umuites.

...

The Upindeoni chefs and servants prepare the long royal dining room table that is adorned by a black table cloth and 7 sets of gold utensils and 7 crisp, white handkerchiefs. The servants pull out the cushioned black and gold dining chairs that wait for their rightful sitters to arrive. Chefs place 7 silver platters with matching cloches to cover up the food along with tall glasses of wine waiting for someone to consume them.

As the tour carriages take the newcomers to start their new lives, seven other larger vehicles come around, circling the wine fountain. The first vehicle is a long, glossy wine-red limousine carriage being pulled by large, shimmering, black unicorns with their manes made of orange and yellow flames. They stop in front of the castle, and the driver hops off of the carriage to open the back door to let out Abigor. He gets out of the vehicle and adjusts his silk red tie that collabs with his black long-sleeved shirt and red vest that has black curly cues dance all over it. His pointed tiger ears twitch and his nose turns up from the sight of Aidoneus' headquarters. "This better be good, Aidoneus," he mutters as his two large tiger feet march to the entrance and kick down the doors, neglecting the hand scanner and destroying the locks, now letting anyone come in.

Abigor's ride leaves, allowing the second vehicle to pull up, which is a pumpkin-shaped, orange metallic carriage, pulled by huge, black, and gray hairy horses that have dust taking over their manes. As they stand in front of the entrance, shaking and shimmying the dust off

themselves, Alphonse prances out of his carriage, still not wearing anything to cover his human upper body and warthog lower body, and he looks at Aidoneus' castle, smiling wildly, exposing his yellow teeth. "Ohohohoho~" Alphonse giggles out, "This going to be soo fun~ Come along, Prosciutto~" As soon as he calls for his pet warthog, Prosciutto stumbles out of the carriage, snorting while following his owner to the door. Alphonse notices the door slightly ajar, and he snickers, knowing that Abigor is the reason, as Prosciutto and he walk inside.

Alphonse's ride makes its exit, letting the third vehicle make way. A fancy platinum wagon being pulled by a ginormous, rose-gold beetle carries a huge egg-shaped cocoon made of shiny spider web. As soon as the wagon comes to a stop, a set of tan hands with platinum claws tears through the cocoon. The claws rip and shred away the webby barrier and reveals Demona, her eight golden spindly legs walk out of the wagon as she stretches her human upper body, the only piece of clothing that's covering her body is white-gold silky web that takes the form of a long sleeve off-shoulder shirt, its slight transparency still revealing Demona's treasures. She adjusts her glittery yellow mask, and her yellow eyes glimmer at the sight of Aidoneus' home, and she squeals out, "Eeee~!! Oh, it's so good to be back here again~! I hope my babies are doing okay though..." Not trying to let the thought of her children fill her with worry and wistfulness, Demona's spider legs lead her to the entrance, and they open the door for her as she lets the warm light from inside welcome her.

Demona's ride crawls off, and the fourth Quphanto comes through in a towering emerald-green palanquin bedazzled with pink oval-cut spinels, blue princess-cut topazes, and white round-cut diamonds, carried by eight barrier Upindeonis wearing silver tuxedos and dress pants, two barriers at each palanquin rail and the golden rails resting on their shoulders. They make it to the entrance, and the barriers lower themselves so that Nasir can exit the vehicle in his

sequined cadmium-green and metallic purple ombre jumpsuit, its deep cut exposing his brown, muscular chest and the bottom of the jumpsuit flare like bell bottoms, making room for his diamond platforms to give the outfit more glamor. He looks around and scrunches up his nose and mutters, “Ugh, I already want to return home...” He raises his peacock feathers, the glittering green, blue, and purple colors dance and shake as they rise. He adjusts his diamond studded sunglasses and struts to the entrance, his feathers having to bend to fit into the entrance since the doorway isn’t big enough for his glorious assets (and it’s already frustrating enough that he, along with his fellow Quphantos, have to shrink in size in order to even get inside their vehicles and get around Umu if they felt like leaving their haven).

As the barriers carry the palanquin away, two glittery, cotton-candy-pink unicorns with white clouds for manes pull a white, round carriage covered in baby-blue and lilac-purple bedspreads, little to no transparency attempting to hide Ophelia as she sleeps in the plush queen-sized bed in her satin, lapis-blue short-sleeved nightgown. The unicorns stop in front of the castle, and the unicorns neigh harmoniously, waking up Ophelia. She looks around to see that she’s made it to her destination, and her long sloth arms grab onto the carriage as they pull and drag her out of the vehicle. She yawns, exposing her fangs, and stretches as her bare feet take in the warmth of the sand. “Ooooooh jooooooy~!” Ophelia sings out, “Iiiiiii caaaaan’t waaaaaiiiit toooooo seeeeeeee myyyyyyyyy friiiiiieeeeends~!” Not wanting to waste time, Ophelia runs inside, her feet tip-tapping at a fast pace.

The bed-carriage drifts away, and an admiral-blue iridescent limousine carriage longer than Abigor’s limo-carriage comes through being pulled by two large, clean, white goats with glittery horns that swirl upwards. The carriage comes to a stop, and the door swings open, revealing Kal holding a small gift box as he slithers out of his vehicle in his velvety wine-purple robe, its



sleeves flowing like long fish fins, his smooth sand-colored chest and shoulders being exposed to the heat waves. The rest of his snake lower body gets out of the carriage, and his tail closes it as he looks at the castle and says, “Mmmm, what could Aidoneus have up his sleeve this time~?” He approaches the doors and slips himself inside, anticipating the meeting to be filled with excitement.

Kal’s ride struts off, and the last vehicle arrives, a deep-purple limousine-carriage that is pulled by a immense black lion, its mane, paws, and tail having an indigo galactic pattern, stars twinkling on them. The driver gets off the carriage to open the door, letting out three other Upindeonis; one Upindeoni rolls out a glittery red carpet, and the other two run to the entrance to hold the door open. The driver helps Vanity out of the limo, and she adjusts her magenta, transparent low-cut dress and faux-fur sparkling boa, her dress featuring a long glittery train and long slit revealing her smooth right leg. If the dress doesn’t snatch the eyes of admirers and enemies, then the Pride Quphanto’ curvaceous figure the dress highlights will. With her head held high and her afro sparkling like the night sky filled with stars, not moving her full lips to utter a word, she sashays into the castle, not saying anything to the Upindeonis that helped her. Once she enters the establishment, the Upindeonis close the door, roll up the carpet, and get back to the carriage to make their exit.

...

The seven Quphantos sit at the dinner table, waiting for Aidoneus to begin the meeting so that they can all feast. Not a word is uttered at the table, letting the soft jazz music play in the background, trying to keep the peace and make everything less awkward. Suddenly, Morgana’s black pumps click clack into the room, getting everyone’s attention. “Hello, everyone,” Morgana says as she looks at the Quphantos with stoicism. She sees Abigor sit at one end of the table by

himself; Alphonse, Demona, and Nasir sit on the left side of the table; and Ophelia, Kal, and Vanity on the right side. Morgana continues, “It is good to see you all. Aidoneus is running a little late, but he’ll be here shortly. He wants you all to go ahead and dig in while the food is still fresh. He hopes you enjoy it. Thank you.” Morgana makes her exit, and the Upindeonis begin removing the cloches from the platters for the special guests.

The cloches are removed, and the view of the dishes pleases the Quphantos’ eyes, revealing their deliciously filling meals. Abigor stares at his large plate that holds ‘The Elephant in the Room’ which is a dish that consists of three thick slices of fried elephant and a salad on the side; Alphonse drools at the sight of his extra large bowl that holds ‘Sugar Overlord’, a dish that contains five scoops of neapolitan ice cream with an excessive amount of whip cream, rainbow sprinkles, brownie bites, cookie dough, chocolate cookie pieces, strawberry cake pieces, chocolate cake pieces, and lemon cake pieces decorating the sundae and making it a tumultuous masterpiece; Demona claps her hands rapidly at the sight of her ‘Hot Bugs’, a plate that has a small mountain of grilled roaches and caterpillars that have been drizzled with hot sauce; Nasir softly smiles at his bowl that contains ‘World Salad’, a salad that consists of berries, leaves, seeds, flowers, and lizards mixed together; Ophelia smiles at her bowl of ‘Nest Salad’, loving the sight of six hard boiled bird eggs surrounded by autumn leaves and twigs; Kal licks his lips at his plate full of ‘Slugs ‘n Nugs’, a dish that has sauteed slugs and fried rat nuggets; and Vanity shows no reaction to her ‘Oh Deer’ dish, a bowl full of deer meat, mice meat, fish meat, dog meat, and rabbit meat socializing in chicken broth.

They all, except for Demona, begin to eat their dishes, not saying anything to each other. *Crunch crunch crunch. Chomp chomp chomp.* The sounds of chewing fill the room, everyone but Demona taking their time enjoying their meal before Aidoneus arrives. Ophelia notices

Demona not eating, and she tilts her head as she asks, “Deeeemooooonaaaaa...Aaaaare yoooooooo noooooot goooooiing tooooooo eeeeeaaaat?”

“Oh,” Demona says startled, “I will! It’s just...”

“Trust me, Demona, we could care less about your mouth,” Abigor says with a scrunched up face, not giving Demona any eye contact.

“My my, it’s been eons, Demona, and you’re *still* self-conscious~?” Alphonse teases, his mouth full of sweetness.

“*Hiiiiiiii* Shut up, pig!!” Demona hisses out.

“Say that to me again but with your mouth exposed, and maybe I’ll take you seriously, *bug-face*,” Alphonse taunts.

“Oh shut up, slob,” Kal jumps in, “At least she isn’t suffering from the case yuck mouth.”

As the three Quphantos argue, Nasir rolls his eyes and continues eating, Vanity stares at her bowl, and Ophelia watches the commotion in dismay. Abigor’s eye twitches and slams down his fists onto the table and booms out, “WOULD YOU ALL JUST SHUT THE FUCK UP!!? Demona, eat your food. Kal, you know better, why are *you* even participating? And Alphonse, say nothing else and stuff your face. We all know you’d be a fucking fatass if it weren’t for your Quphanto abilities.” Kal softly giggles at Abigor’s demand towards Alphonse, making the gluttonous Quphanto look at him with a scrunched up face.

Ophelia says, “Caaaaaan’t weeeee aaaaaaall juuuuuust geeeeeet aloooooon-”

“You shut up ESPECIALLY, Ophelia,” Abigor growls through his gritted teeth, looking at her with slit pupils. Ophelia’s head immediately droops, and she leans into her bowl to continue eating her salad in silence, her sloth arms tilting the bowl to make eating easier.

“Woow, that was just unnecessary, Abi,” Alphonse snickers out, “I think you’re gonna make her cry again~ Ohohohohoho~”

“That’s all she’s able to do since she’s too slow to even get out her retorts in time,” Abigor says, making Alphonse laugh out loud.

“Don’t be so ridiculous, Abigor,” Demona jumps back in, “You know that Ophelia can’t help how she was made... like how you can’t seem to control your pissy fits, pussycat.”

“I’m not speaking to you right now,” Abigor snaps back. Demona scoffs at Abigor, not saying anything else to the fuming tiger and playful warthog. She waves her hand across her face, making her glittery yellow mask disappear, revealing her extremely wide mouth with thin lips. Alphonse looks at her in quiet discomfort as she leans into her food, opens her mouth widely, and reveals her shark-like teeth and two spider fangs slowly emerge out. She leans into her plate, and her spider fangs gather the roaches and caterpillars and reel them into her mouth. *Crunch crunch crunch crunch*. Her sharp teeth break down and cut through the insects, the flavors calming her down. Alphonse decides to stop watching her and instead continues stuffing his own mouth as well as sharing his food with Prosciutto.

Kal looks to his left, where Ophelia is still eating in quietness, and he slithers his tail close to her, letting it softly pat her head. Ophelia notices the gesture, and although she doesn’t stop eating, she begins kicking her feet happily like a little kid. Kal then looks at Vanity, who hasn’t said a word since she’s been here, and he slides over the gift box to her. “I had gotten you this, Vanity,” he says with a serene smile, “I hope you like it, darling~” Vanity grabs the box and opens it to reveal a small, purple heart-shaped perfume bottle.

“...Thank you, Kal,” Vanity finally responds, not giving Kal eye contact, however. She gently closes the box back and leaves it resting next to her dish.

Kal looks at Nasir, watching him digging in his food in peace, but a playful smirk slithers onto Kal's face. While still patting Ophelia's head with his tail, Kal says, "Soooo, Nasir, how's your little fashion shows~?"

"Don't talk to me, hoebag," Nasir responds, not holding back the venom any longer, his peacock feathers shaking in fury.

"Oh my~ At least I get laid~ Maybe if you spoke to me more nicely, I'd send you a Tansi to ride that bird beak you call a nose~" Kal hisses out, still maintaining that smirk.

"That's all you blue imps are good for anyways!" Nasir yells out.

"Nasy-wasy, your envy is showing~" Kal sings out.

"Ugh!! Abigor, get your lover!!" Nasir demands, looking at Abigor with exasperation.

"For the love of Ideya, he's not my partner," Abigor growls as he looks at Nasir with piercing red eyes.

"Awwww, Abi, it's okay, honey~" Kal purrs out, "You're not ready for my loving~"

"I don't think I ever will," Abigor mutters.

"Not true~! Just give it time~! You, Demona, Nasir, Ophelia, and Vanity can all have my love when you're ready~!....Except you, Alphonse," Kal sneers out in the end.

"Fine by me, I have a better chemistry with food and Prosciutto than snake venom anyways," Alphonse mutters, his mouth still full of dessert.

"Ugh, how *dare* you think *I* want *your* 'love'," Nasir gags.

"Looooooooooooook," Ophelia finally speaks, swallowing her food. Everyone looks to see Ophelia pointing at something, and they see that she's pointing at Aidoneus standing at the entrance, smiling. Ophelia announces, "Aaaaiiiiiiiiiidoneeeuuuss iiiiiiiss heeee~"

“Yes, we see that, Aidoneus is here,” Abigor interrupts, making Ophelia look at him with quiet temper, and because she is closest to him at the table, she kicks his leg with brute force, making Abigor grunt out of pain and everyone else gasp.

“Twaaaaaaaaaat,” Ophelia growls out, keeping her fiery gaze on Abigor, their eyes not breaking contact, only growls from the two can be heard.

“Now now,” Aidoneus says calmly, finally breaking the tension, “This isn’t how I wanted the get-together to go down~ I apologize for taking so long. I had to get some *other* guests~” After saying that, he walks into the room to take his seat across Abigor, Nasir to his left and Vanity to his right. Seconds later, the Cerberus Brothers walk in, making everyone’s eyes widen, and they stand behind Aidoneus’ seat, hands behind their backs, being the security guards that Aidoneus knows and trusts.

“Well well~” Alphonse says, “I didn’t think I’d see you three again! How’s everything~? How’s your shoulder, Beta~?”

“...It’s fine,” Beta answers reluctantly.

Ophelia and Alpha share glances at each other, and Ophelia immediately blushes while Alpha’s face becomes warm. However, before they could even share a few words, Aidoneus says, “Well, speaking of Beta’s shoulder, let’s talk about what happened.” The Cerberus Brothers and Umu Quphantos, though are still eating, keep quiet to hear what Aidoneus has up his sleeve this time around.

Aidoneus puts his elbows on the table and folds his hands, and he begins explaining. With a stolid expression, he says, “As we all know, my son, Anti, has been away from home for too long. Cerberus has failed to bring him back due to injuries they have received from this... what did they call themselves?”

Alpha answers, "...The Special Six..."

"Aah yes," Aidoneus sighs, "The Special Six...such a childish name...and yet they've done so much damage."

"What of my Carnation, Aidoneus?" Aidoneus looks at Vanity, seeing no emotion on her face, although it seems she's holding back some built-up sorrow.

"...Well," Aidoneus begins, "My Goddess, the Upindeoni that I sent out to rescue Carnation is still out there. But don't worry, the plan that I wanted to tell you all will kill two birds with one stone." Vanity lets out a soft sigh and closes her eyes, tightening her fists on the table, her panther tail frizzes up. Aidoneus notices Vanity's body language, and he gently rests his hand on top of her right fist. "Vanity," he says softly, "Just hear me out... please..."

***"I've been hearing you out for over a century now,"*** Vanity growls through gritted teeth while slamming her left fist down, startling everyone but Aidoneus. ***"I'll go to that realm my damn self and get her if I have to..."***

"Vaaaaaniiiiiiyyyyyyyy," Ophelia speaks up, but Vanity doesn't budge. Abigor was about to say something, but Kal and Demona stare him down, Demona's mouth and spider fangs still exposed, keeping Abigor at bay. Ophelia says, "Aaaaidoooooneuuuuss haaaaaas aaaalwaaaays maaaade aaaa waaaaay... Pleeeeeeeaaaaaaase giiiiive hiiiiiiiiim aaaaaa chaaaaance tooooooo shoooooow yooooooouuuu whaaaaat heeeee haaaaas plaaaaanned..."

"She's right, Vanity," Demona jumps in, "Aidoneus has done so much for us...all of us..."

"...Hurry up," Vanity sneers.

Not wasting time, Aidoneus says, "You won't have to go anywhere...neither will Cerberus...because *I'll* go get Anti and Carnation myself." The Cerberus Brothers' eyes widen from their lord's announcement, and the Quphantos are left speechless. Aidoneus continues, "I

have been entertaining Anti's shenanigans for far too long, and I believe it's time that I show him what I can really do. He loves playing games...he forgets where he gets that trait from. I will be getting the Colosseum prepared for the biggest event in history. It will be a show, starring Anti and his little *friends*, The Special Six....Or perhaps the Fumbling Four~"

"Aidoneus....Who exactly is within this group?" Abigor questions.

"...You'll see~ It's all a surprise~ Just trust me," Aidoneus says, smiling, "Just prepare the games you're gonna want Anti and his team of brats to participate in. And yes...***they can be deadly if you would like for them to be~***" The Quphantos don't say anything else. They nod their heads in agreement and continue eating their food and drinking their wine, curious to see how Aidoneus' plan will be executed. "Now if you'll excuse me, friends~! I have to get ready. You all enjoy your meals, and please stay here for when I get back. It won't take me long~ My Upindeonis will have your guest rooms ready, but since you all haven't been here for a while, they won't have to do much~! Thank you for listening to me, I very much appreciate it~."

Aidoneus gets up from his seat, bows, looks at Vanity, and he gently grabs her hand. Vanity and Aidoneus look at each other for what seems like an eon. Her amethyst-purple eyes dig and claw at Aidoneus' red-orange-yellow eyes, but she takes a few deep breaths, and she feels her eyes water. Not saying another word, Aidoneus plants his soft lips on top of her soft hand, feeling her electricity surge through him. He lets her go and leaves the dining room, and The Cerberus Brothers follow behind him, waiting for his next order.

As they walk back into the throne room, Alpha thinks back to what Aidoneus just told the Quphantos. Beta and Gamma notice Alpha's concern, and they share a look of curiosity. The eldest brother looks at Aidoneus and breaks the silence with, "My Lord...?"

"Yes, Alpha~?" Aidoneus says to Alpha, smiling as they walk.



“...What did you mean that they’ll become The Fumbling *Four*?”

“...*Hmhmhmhmhm*~ Ooh Alpha, you know I can’t reveal all my secrets~ Besides... you can’t host a game without *prizes*...right~?”

The Cerberus Brothers’ eyes widen as they figure out what Aidoneus is planning to do. Alpha immediately hushes his voice to where the Quphantos can’t hear him and urges, “*Lord Aidoneus, you can’t be serious!*”

“I’m as serious as a human’s beliefs,” Aidoneus responds.

Alpha walks in front of Aidoneus, getting close to him to whisper, “*My Lord, you’re already breaking the Spiritual Laws by not only having Anti here **but also** trying to bring back Carnation. And now you’re trying to drag **more** humans down here as bargaining chips!?”*

“...Are you questioning me, Alpha?”

“*Yes, sir, **I am.***” Beta’s and Gamma’s eyes widen even more, their jaws dropping to the checkerboard floor. Alpha continues, “*The Quphantos are only going to let you slide with so much. They’re already allowing you to keep Anti here, and of course Vanity is going to give you the green light to bring her companion, who’s **supposed to stay in Gaia as well.** Anti and the cat are all you need. **That’s it.***”

“...”

“*Do whatever you want with them. You can still hold the public punishment for Anti... but you **cannot** bring the girls down here. Please, Aidoneus...*”

“... Ah... the Spiritual Laws...*That’s* what you’re worried about?” Aidoneus sneers.

“Yes, Aidoneus.”

“*Sighs* Oh Alpha...” Aidoneus shakes his head, sucking his teeth, and placing his hands on his hips. He looks at Alpha with a ‘guilty’ smile and says, “Perhaps if you didn’t fail your

mission, I wouldn't have felt like such *desperate* measures were needed." Alpha's heart drops from the insult, but before he can even get a word in, Aidoneus continues, "But don't worry, Alpha. I understand that you were only trying to do what you can while abiding by the rules Ideya has set for all of us. You're such a good role model~. However, my role is not anything like yours. So you continue being the good spirit hound that you are, and I'll continue being the rule breaker. I can actually afford to do that...do you understand?"

Gamma begins growling, but Beta nudges him to shut up, trying to keep him from getting into trouble with their leader. Alpha's body stays frozen from Aidoneus' lukewarm words. Not trying to hold Aidoneus any longer, he mutters, "...Yes, sir..."

"Good. I always appreciate you, Alpha. I'm only tough on you because I care. Now return to the Pits," Aidoneus commands, "I need to get going." Not saying another word, the Cerberus Brothers make their exit. Before the brothers can leave the castle however, Aidoneus says out loud, "I don't know why you're so worked up, Alpha~! Carnation was your lover, was she not~? I'm doing everything I can to bring you two back together~!" Alpha doesn't respond and leaves, Beta and Gamma following him. The mischievous Upindeoni sighs and says to himself, "Now...*let's have some fun~*"

**Chapter 28**  
**Two Days Ago**  
**July 2017**  
**Late Morning**

As Zeena, Delilah, and Rose talk in the living room, Usiku and Shandon look at each other in silence in the kitchen, listening to Rose explaining what has recently happened. Continuing to listen, Usiku sits at the dinner table, closing his eyes as he prays that Zeena and Shandon will leave soon, while Shandon digs through the refrigerator and pulls out a paper bag he brought with him. The drunken Upendelaiki/Quphanto hybrid removes the paper bag to reveal a large bottle of cognac, and he grabs himself a cup and fills it to the brim with the brown, distilled liquid. Usiku notices Shandon strengthening the spirits already controlling him, and the roots of his irritation that reside in his heart begins to slowly sprout leaves of fury.

Shandon takes a few sips of his burning potion, hissing from the fiery comfort that rushes down his throat. He quietly stumbles towards Usiku and leans against one of the chairs for comfort, and he silently hisses out, *“So instead of helping the same guy you helped back in ‘91, and simultaneously help ya’ second-mom get yo’ second-dad and his brother back, you decided to throw yo’ daughter’s friends out there...Why, Usiku?”* While waiting for an answer, Shandon takes another sip of his potion, but Usiku keeps his eyes closed, waiting for his prayer to come true. Shandon continues, *“I’m just sayin’, **brother**, all of this could have been avoided if **you** would have just taken care of things like how you used to. It was so easy for you back then.”*

“...”

*“Those peonis are just **souls** after all, right? They can never ‘die’. They have a reset...**unlike us Gaians**,”* Shandon stares at Usiku, a small flame flickering in his brown eyes wanting to shine light to Usiku’s upcoming demise. *“Yeah, you didn’t think that Pops would tell me about this shit,*

*huh?*” Shandon snickers dryly. Usiku finally opens his eyes to look at his drunken brother, seeing the young, rebellious boy he met 26 years ago.

Suddenly, they both hear Zeena say, “Hmm...I’m gonna go check on them,” knowing that she’s about to walk into the kitchen. As soon as she says those words, Usiku’s heart leaps and perturbation finally stops embracing him. Zeena walks in, her wedges gently clomping onto the wooden floor, and she whispers out, “*Whatever y’all got goin’ on in here, **stop it.***” She looks at her husband and brother-in-law, and her Malaiki senses were correct: they were definitely going to get into something messy just now, and sadly she knows who’s the culprit.

“*Please remove your husband, Zeena,*” Usiku says softly, “*He seems to be trying to antagonize me, when that’s the **last** thing that needs to be happening, right now.*”

“*Oh come on, Usiku,*” Shandon growls, “*We’re just having a **heart to heart.***”

“*We can have a **heart to heart** without you **throwing dirt,***” Usiku grits his teeth.

“*Oh I ain’t throwin’ dirt! I’m just statin’ facts!*”

“*And what facts are you trying to state here?*”

“*That you’re a serial killer who still hasn’t apologized for what he’s done to Crescent City or his own brother, and to save his ass from getting the boot from his **sOuLMaTE**, he threw his daughter’s friends into the mix under the pretense that he was tryin’ to strengthen Rose’s connection to her friend circle by exposing them to our world and to give them a **PuRpOSe.***”

Zeena walks towards Shandon and rests her hand on his shoulder, and she sighs out, “*Pooh, let’s go home, okay?*” Usiku notices Zeena’s face filled with disappointment mixed in with embarrassment. He sits there and wonders why she thought bringing Shandon here intoxicated was a good idea to begin with. Did she even know that he was intoxicated?

Shandon yanks his head to look at his wife and hisses out, “*Why? You **wanted** to come here.*”

The Malaiki/human hybrid rolls her eyes and whispers back, *“I didn’t know they were having that talk today!”*

Usiku slowly stands up, sucks air through his teeth, and mutters, *“And this is why you call before inviting yourselves here...”*

Shandon whips his head back at Usiku and murmurs, *“We’re supposed to be **family**, remember?”*

*“Even with **family**, there are still **boundaries** that you don’t **cross**,”* Usiku begins growling out.

Zeena senses the intense aura once more, and she gets between the two half Quphantos. She holds her hands out to make sure Shandon and Usiku keep their distance from each other, and instantly Shandon presses against her soft hand, letting her know that he’s about to make a move if Usiku says one more ‘wrong’ thing. *“Y’all please not now,”* Zeena says with a little more volume, but low enough to where Delilah, Rose, and Cocoa couldn’t hear her, *“Usiku, I’m sorry we came here. Clearly, it’s a bad time, so we’ll just come back when you and Rose finish, oka-”*

*“We ain’t goin’ nowhere,”* Shandon hisses before taking a gulp of his potion once again.

Zeena looks into her husband’s eyes, trying to find that side of him that has more sense and maturity and says calmly, *“Shandon. **Let’s. Go.**”*

*“Not until I hear from Usiku’s big ass lips that he admits that he was wrong, apologizes to Rose, and apologizes to ME!”* Shandon sneers out, and Usiku instantly starts pressing Zeena’s hand with more force than Shandon, but Zeena manages to keep him at bay.

Usiku snaps back, *“**Stop making everything about you, you goddamn numbskull!**”*

*“I’m not the jungle fiend that tried to get on TV for **COUNTLESS MURDERS**, ya’ fuckin’ hobo!?”* Shandon and Usiku attempt to get closer to each other, stepping to the side, using a little

brute force, but Zeena manages to follow the footwork and keep her position strong to keep the beefing brothers from clashing.

***“It was NEVER about fame for me!!”***

***“THEN WHAT THE FUCK WAS IT ABOUT!?”***

Zeena pushes the brothers, making them stumble backwards a little, and she whispers,

***“WOULD YOU TWO STOP IT!? I understand sorting out your differences, but this ain’t how we ‘bout to do it!!”***

Suddenly, they hear Delilah say out loud, “No!! Are you crazy!?” All movement in the kitchen ceases, and the three family members look at the living room. Even though they can’t see Delilah and Rose from where they are at, they can tell that Delilah is making a face displaying grimace.

Then, they hear Rose say, “Well you two aren’t giving me a choice!! You’ve had all this time to tell me about my family, who I am basically, and you never did it!! You two *still* don’t want to tell me anything!! What, did you guys think that I *wouldn’t* grow curious the longer that I didn’t know anything!?” Shandon’s ears perk from the word ‘family’ coming out of his niece’s mouth, and he looks at Usiku to smirk at him. He grabs the bottle to pour himself some more cognac, grabs his cup and, while catching Zeena off guard, sprints to the living room, not spilling a singular fluid ounce of his liquid negligence.

---

Darkness embraces Usiku as he gains his consciousness. He looks around and takes a long sigh, realizing that he is in Dream Realm once again. He begins walking in the nothingness, waiting for either his sisters to scold him or reconcile him or his skeleton ‘friends’ to come out and speak out whatever murder-inducing thoughts they can dig up from Usiku’s past, taunting

him while also begging him to make that 180 and to forget about the amount of change and progress he's made for the better, for his family, and for himself. However, someone else creeps out of the darkness. Usiku looks and sees a large skeleton wearing a cloak. The skeleton stares into Usiku's soul with the glowing red dots within his eye sockets, sending blistering shivers along Usiku's spine.

The hooded skeleton disappears in smoke and reappears next to the lucid dreamer, still much taller than him, and says, "Well well well, never thought I'd be able to communicate with you again, Usiku. You haven't been clear-minded as of late. Which is surprising because usually all it takes is for you to be with Delilah for us to meet. Hmmm... aah, of course... Rose. Those two are your world now, and when one is in distress, your world is in chaos until all is well, again."

"..." Usiku stays silent as he continues walking, waiting for the world to change up somehow.

"*Sighs* Listen you fool, it's either talking to me or my boney friends come to have a chat," the skeleton says in a deep, raspy voice.

"You know, for a Quphanto that preaches on and on about achieving *balance*, you sure love rubbing the fact that I caused a lot of death in my face," Usiku growls as he stops walking and looks straight at his godfather, Ubokufa, or at least the cynical 'death' half of Ubokufa. "You've been doing it ever since Rose was born. And for what," Usiku continues, "Do you *want* me to go back to my old ways!?"

"Of course I don't, you buffoon," Ubokufa snaps back, "And don't talk like *I* control your dreams. It's not my fault that you feel this *guilt*. Besides, Rose needs to know how damaged the family tree truly is."

"BY TORTURING ME!?"

“Again, it’s that guilt I mentioned if you were paying attention. You’re feeling guilty, they reflect it. They seem really determined to drill into that thick skull of yours that ‘murder’ was *never* the way of this family. *It never was supposed to be*. Look at it all as...*Karma*, as your brother would word it. It’s a lesson you should have learned at an early age, but you’re learning it now. You should be grateful *this* is happening to you. Other people usually continue life regretting their decisions and going through their personal battles behind prison walls or worse.”

“But at one point, you *praised* me for my work,” Usiku yells out, red dots begin glowing in his eyes, “Baba even said you praised *him!*”

“I never *praised* you two, you ignoramus. How many times do I have to mention these emotions that you all possess when in the Dream Realm? You all were just so lost in your murderous ways that everytime I tried to contact you all and tell you that what you’re doing is wrong, your delusions and peonis twisted my words and actions to feed your frail egos. Thank Ideya that I was able to find your sisters. It's because of them, *you* started to gain some sort of sense to where I can at least make you *question* your ways, but that still wasn’t enough, clearly. It had to take Ideya to bring Delilah and Rose into your life for me to have a successful intrusion into your dreams. Now the skeletons are finally able to tell you what you've been needing to hear for half of your life. It's just that your emotions are in the way, making the skeletons seem like they're making fun of you.”

“...”

“...Usiku...”

“Is that why you’re scaring Rose?” Usiku asks.

“...”

“She told me...She’s been having nightmares... I know it’s you doing that...”



“... I’m like everyone else, Usiku.. I wanted you to tell her the family history. I wanted her to know the truth. But it seems that she favors the ‘life’ side so much that my ‘death’ side terrifies her.”

“Ever thought of going to her as just your ‘life’ side then?”

“I could....but then I don’t think my ‘life’ side would be able to truly show her how dire this family issue is.”

“ ... ”

“Any other questions?”

“*Sighs* Look,” Usiku says, not wanting to look or listen to Ubokufa anymore, and he sees a long mirror in front of him, his reflection looking back at him. He lets out a trembling sigh, and he says, “I know that I’ve done wrong... I’m haunted by it everyday... What Baba has taught me was wrong... I know that now... I’m trying my best, Ubokufa, I really am...”

“ ... ”

“I...I...” Usiku tries to search for the right words as he looks at himself, but the only word that clouds everything is ‘Rose’. Suddenly, the mirror changes the reflection to Rose, and she stares at him with a sorrowful face. He begins feeling his eyes starting to burn, but he fights the tears back. His voice begins cracking as he says, “I just don’t want....I don’t want Rose to... to see me as a monster...”

Ubokufa gets closer to Usiku and rests his phalanges on his godson’s shoulder. “Usiku,” he says, “Listen to me, and listen to me carefully while you can. I know that I’m hard on you, and I know that my avatars will cause mischief... but if you truly want to stop this torture, you *have* to *truly* accept what you did and *make peace* with the ones you’ve hurt while *being proud* of the person you are *now*. It’s clear now that what you’re afraid of the most is losing Rose. You’re

afraid of Rose judging you. However, if she's anything like my 'life' half and Delilah... she's going to cherish you, regardless. She'll know that your past actions don't define who you are now." As soon as he says this, Rose's reflection smiles at Usiku, her smile sending warmth through the glass, and her smile's warmth melts Usiku's heart, causing tears to roll down his face. "It is time to stop hiding, Usiku," Ubokufa says, "Come to the light with your family... ***before it's too late.***"

Usiku looks at Ubokufa as his tears wet his face, and he sees Ubokufa summoning a glowing red rose. He whimpers out, "No...No no, not this again!!" He tries to look away but he turns to see a meadow filled with roses, the clear skies and bright sunshine startling him. "No no no no," Usiku whines out, "Ubokufa, what is this!?"

"***The vision...remember?***" Ubokufa says stoically, "***The same vision you've been having since the beginning of June...***" The roses all dance and sway with the soft breeze.

"I know that!!" Usiku yells, "But why am I *still* seeing it!?"

However, Ubokufa doesn't say anything as he lets the vision continue. Suddenly, the sky is covered in dark clouds, no sight of the blue color or the welcoming sun. Thunder begins to roll as lightning flashes across the sky. The winds become violent, shoving the roses in different directions along with Usiku, but Ubokufa stays stagnant. Suddenly, the roses glow, and a shield surrounds them as lightning begins to strike down on them, the bright light causing Usiku to cover his salted eyes. The lightning continuously strikes the shield, making sparks fly and the thunder booms in Usiku's ears. He glimpses at the horrendous view, seeing the roses trying to protect him. Then after what seems like forever, the storm finally passes, and the roses make the shield disappear, and Usiku fully opens his eyes once again to see the aftermath. As soon as the shield disappears, however, the roses begin to slowly wilt, their petals crinkle and break off as

they lose their vibrant red color, and the skies are now a light gray, no sun in display. The lifeless sight knocks Usiku down to his knees, his body trembling and his breath shaky, knowing who's supposed to be the roses. "STOP SHOWING ME THIS, UBOKUFA!!" Usiku cries out, gripping the dry grass, "MY DAUGHTER IS NOT GOING TO DIE!! I ALREADY FIXED ALL OF THIS!!"

Usiku gets up and looks at his godfather, and yells out, "THE ONLY TROUBLES I HAVE TO DEAL WITH NOW IS THIS FAMILY BULLSHIT!!" Ubokufa stays silent. Suddenly, a golden lioness, white tiger, gray wolf, spotted deer, and black cat appear next to Usiku, staring at Ubokufa with a mixture of anger and sadness. "THE GIRLS HAVE DONE THEIR PART," Usiku proclaims, "SO WHY AM I STILL SEEING THIS VISION!?"

Ubokufa looks at Usiku with his emotionless, skeletal face. He gets closer to Usiku to look at his soul, and he croaks out, "*You're smart, kid... figure it out.*"

---

Usiku slowly wakes up to soft, smooth lips gently pecking his right cheek. *Smooch! Smooch! Smooch!* He lets out a yawn and looks at the culprit that woke him up, and his heart warms up from the sight of his soulmate, Delilah planting kisses on his face. They share a stare, exchanging smiles and enjoying each other's presence. Delilah softly says, "Good evening, honey~"

"Good...evening??" Usiku groans out, making Delilah's heart jump. She begins cuddling him, and he wraps his massive arms around her; she purrs from the sensation she receives from his body hair along with his body warmth comforting her like a fuzzy blanket, and she accidentally reveals her swaying purple Tansi tail and changes her round pupils to heart-shaped ones. Usiku plants a few kisses on top of Delilah's forehead, and sighs out of relief. He looks at

the clock on his bedside to check the time and sees that it's 10:30 PM. "Huh...I've been asleep this entire day...?" he asks.

"Mhm," Delilah whimpers out, "Are you okay, Usi?" she pouts her lips and makes doggy eyes at her lover, her tail ceased swaying.

"No...but I will be once I get this talk with Shandon over with," Usiku grumbles.

"Yep, it's tomorrow," Delilah whines out, nuzzling his fuzzy chest.

"Yeah..." Usiku lets out a sigh of despair, and on cue, thunder begins rolling around, followed by heavy rain drops hitting against their roof. The rain reminds Usiku of the vision he's had in his dreams for months now, the dreadful feeling making a return and causing his heart to quiver. Delilah notices Usiku's body slightly shaking, and she squeezes him more tightly.

"It'll be okay, Usi," Delilah reassures her lover, "All we have to do is just let Shandon release whatever remaining steam he has in his system, and when he's finished, you hit him with that, 'You're right, brother, I apologize for everything', and then boom! You two hug it out, smoke a blunt together, the end~!"

"Erm... I'm not sure about the 'smoking a blunt' part, my dear," Usiku softly chuckles.

"Okay okay, fine, play a game of Bones together! I'll keep up with points~!" Delilah giggles out.

"Hehe, yeah...I like the sound of that," Usiku softly smiles.

"Oh! But before we do that, I want to give Rose her phone," Delilah mentions.

"Hm? She doesn't have her phone?"

"Nuh-uh! I went into her room after talking to Alex, and it turns out that it's still there."

"Hmmm... she must have left it there when she and I went to the Garden..."

“Ooooh, most likely. Well, I want to give it to her just so I can keep in touch with her. If I know her well, she’s most likely at Tenacity’s place.”

Suddenly, a firework goes off in Usiku’s brain. Rose. Thunderstorm. The roses and thunderstorm in his vision. Could this be what the vision was referring to? Surely it wouldn’t be this literal, would it? These thoughts running laps around Usiku’s brain make his heart feel like it’s a ticking time bomb. Immediately, Usiku bolts right out of bed and gets dressed, startling Delilah. “D-Darling, what are you doing?” she asks, tilting her head, her Tansi tail disappearing.

“Get dressed, now, ‘Lilah,” Usiku says while putting on his pants and shirt hurriedly. “Grab Rose’s phone, call Tenacity, and let her know we’re on our way to check on Rose.”

“Baby, why are yo-”

“Come on!!”

“Okay okay!!” Delilah gets up and finds gray jogging pants and a black tank top with her purple lightweight jacket.

Usiku finishes before Delilah and puts on his cloak, and he asks her, “Are you ready?”

Delilah zips up her jacket and says, “Y-Yeah, I just gotta find my ke-”

“Forget the keys, baby,” Usiku exclaims as his brain panics, “Just call Tenacity!”

“Alright alright! But after I do that, you better tell me what’s going on!” Delilah declares as she leaves the room to retrieve her daughter’s phone and call Tenacity. Seconds later, she comes back into the room, letting the dial tone sing to let Usiku know that she’s calling Tenacity.

Meanwhile, Usiku yells out, “Zawati!!” as he puts the hood over his head.

One of the bats appears in red sparkles, and Zawati looks at her twin brother in worry. *Squeak squeak squeak?*

“After Delilah confirms Rose’s location, I need you and one of the others to teleport us, okay? It’s an emergency...!” Usiku says hastily.

*Squeak squeak squeak squeak!*

“...You’re right... You’re right... *sighs*... I have to calm down...”

*Squeak squeak squeak squeak?*

“Yes...*it happened again... something isn’t right,*” Usiku says under his breath. Usiku inhales and exhales deeply, trying to slow down his heart that is pumping fear across his body at a swift pace.

“Usi,” Delilah says as she walks up to Usiku, “I just called Tee, and she says they’re heading for Jacqueline’s place.”

“What the- Why there!?” Usiku exclaims.

“Baby, I don’t know! They’re friends! Why *wouldn’t* they go over there?” Delilah snaps back.

“...”

“*Sighs* Look I’ll go ahead and call her back, just let me grab my phone in case Amy or Alex tries to call,” Delilah exhales out as she walks to her nightstand, “And Usi?... You better know what you’re doing...”

## Chapter 29

July 2017

Night

Nermal makes it to the back porch, where the large swimming pool is located, although its beautiful view is ruined by the monstrous thunderstorm and the porch lights do little to no enhancement to the scary setting. Nonetheless, Kendo sits on the edge of the pool, his legs being swallowed by the chlorine-filled water and his body and ocean of black hair drenched by the rain water. Nermal looks through the screen door, hesitant about getting close to Kendo because of the harsh storm, so she decides to open the door slightly, ignoring the rain droplets that manage to fly into the kitchen, and she yells through the storm, “Ken!! Come back inside!! It’s dangerous out here!!” However, Kendo doesn’t move a muscle, not even to look at his new friend. Nermal closes the door back, trying not to get the kitchen floor any wetter, feeling a cool sensation from her clothes which caught some of the hits of rain as well. *Come on, NeeNee*, she cheers for herself, *You have to get him out of the rain or... or uh... Oh! He could get sick! But... do Upindeonis get sick??? But maybe because he’s half-human, there may be a chance for him to catch a cold. Wait, can you get a cold in the Summer? Dang it, focus!! What can you do to bring him inside??* Nermal ponders all of her options, but she comes to the conclusion that there’s only one sensible way since calling for him didn’t work and to even attempt to drag him physically is near impossible.

The Samaka-human hybrid takes a few deep breaths, readying herself to go back outside, and she hastily opens the door and bolts towards Kendo, letting the door close itself. Trying to ignore the rain’s overwhelming embrace, she kneels down behind Kendo and gives him a tight hug, slightly startling the jokester. Then, nuzzling him like a cat, she plants her lips close enough to the point Kendo can only feel her gentle breath against his right ear, and she begins whisper-singing.

*My oh my, would you look at this storm,  
How the waters swish and sway so violently,  
It's not the type of weather for fish to swarm,  
For the waves force the place to be filled with nihility...*

As Nermal sings, the gentle notes fill Kendo's ear and push away the sound of the rain as if he has submerged underwater and the only sound he can hear now is Nermal's clear voice. His body begins feeling numb as Nermal continues singing.

*So please, at least for me,  
Come back to where it's calm and warm,  
The place where we can laugh and eat,  
Where love's supposed to keep us from all harm...*

As soon as she finishes singing her verse, she begins humming, keeping the Samaka spell strong. She gets up, and seconds later, Kendo lifts his heavy legs out of the pool, and he stands up, following Nermal back to the kitchen, his drenched jeans trying to stop him. They enter the kitchen, and Nermal stops Kendo from walking any further as her humming along with the water that drips from both of their clothes and hair fill the room, and she goes through a drawer to grab a silver mini-whistle from a group of silver spoons. She stands in front of Kendo again and blows the whistle with little force; no sound comes out of the tool, but the underwater sensation in Kendo's ears drains out as his ear drums are disturbed by an agonizing shrill. Kendo jumps from the disturbance and covers his ears as he yells, "AAH!! Ssssss, GODDAMN!!"

Nermal immediately stops using her whistle and gently rests her hands on Kendo's wet shoulders, and she whimpers out, "I know! I know! I'm sorry! But it was the only way I had to break the spell!"



“And you happened to have it in here!?” Kendo exclaims looking at her with a strained face.

“Yes! This is where I keep it!” Nermal answers, “I would sing to Jackie’s mom from time to time in the dining room, and I would accidentally hypnotize her when she forgets to take her magic ear drops. So I just keep my whistle in here in case that ever happens.”

Kendo lets out an exhausted sigh, “Okay, fair... Soooo... What, are there other ways to break Samakas’ little serenades?”

“Mhm! There’s whistles, ear drops, ear plugs, and potions! There’s probably some other ways now, but those tools have been around for the longest! And of course, you have to get them from Umrhas.”

“Wait, I thought Umrhas only fucked with making potions?”

“Who said they had to stop there? They’re pretty flexible with magic, you know! It doesn’t *have* to be for potions only!”

“Hm... guess I haven’t slept with enough Umrhas to know that.”

“Kendo!!”

“Hahahaha! What? I’m not ashamed. I can sit here and tell you *all* of my experiences, buuut then we’d be here for about a month or two.”

“U-Uh w-wow...”

“Yeeeeeaaah, I’m such a man-whore~”

“A-Anyway! We’re getting off topic! Ken, why were you out there in the storm!?”

Kendo looks at Nermal with a soft smile, but he keeps his lips sealed. Instead, he looks at how they’re both still soaked from the thunderstorm’s shower and comments, “Hey, shouldn’t you be getting your fish tail or something?”

“H-Huh?” Nermal asks, tilting her head to the side with doe eyes.

“The thunderstorm? You’re a Samaka? Water? Transformation?” Kendo asks a series of questions, hoping for something to click.

“Oh!” Nermal laughs out loud, “No, silly! That’s not how it works! We have to be submerged into a large body of water for a certain amount of time *and* have nothing in the way of our legs in order to transform! Buuuut we do get slimy from water regardless, which can be a pain sometimes- Heeeey...” Nermal realizes that she trailed off again because of her new friend and points at him as she says, “You’re distracting me again!!”

Kendo giggles at her realization, but as Nermal pouts at him, she takes a closer look at him, and notices that something is off about him. She squints her eyes, and, unless her sight is playing tricks on her, she sees that Kendo’s eyes are a little puffy. As much as she wants to question him, she’s noticed that he’ll avoid whatever questions that involve him right now. Instead, she cheerfully says, “Well, I’m sure you’re wanting to dry off. I’ll get a towel from the utility room!” Nermal walks to her destination, and Kendo decides to stand there, getting lost in the pattern of the gray marble floor, the water that falls from his hair drip-dropping and adding depth to the artwork. *Drip. Drop. Drip.* A few seconds later, Nermal comes back into the kitchen with two bath towels and gives one of them to Kendo. “Here you go,” she says while she starts wringing the water out of her straight, blue, and green hair with her towel, some of her hair strands slowly transforming into frizz. However, Kendo looks at his white bath towel, watching the water from his hair drip onto it and being immediately absorbed.

Kendo’s mind begins to fill with whispers of doubt, confusion, and regret once more, teasing him to go back outside to drown them out. Then, without hesitation, he looks at Nermal and asks, “Do you ever miss your home?....Your *first* home?”

“Oh,” Nermal starts, intrigued by his question, “Well, of course I do. I miss everything about it... The ocean, the fish, the coral reefs, the sharks... Mom... Mr. Manta... I miss all of them... If it weren’t for Mom being captured... or Mr. Manta passing away... I would still be in the ocean...” Tears begin to form, stinging her eyes like they were jellyfish. She continues, “I...I sometimes wish I could go back there... back home... but I know that if I did... I would abandon my friends... my new family... and I don’t know if I’m ready to say goodbye...” The tears spill over, surprising Nermal as she wipes them away. She looks to see if Kendo notices, and she sees that he is looking at her with a sorrowful face, a face she’s never seen him wear before. She shakes and shimmies her head to snap herself out of the sad spell and says, “I’m sorry!! I-I’m fine! I just can’t seem to talk about home without getting sad about it... Even after 7 years... it’s still so painful...”

Kendo watches Nermal, senses how much she cherishes the memories of her old home, no matter how much joy and sorrow they bring. He says in a low, calm voice, “It sounds like you should at least visit there... You know, at least have a moment with it, see how it is now...”

“It sounds nice, but... I’m afraid I’ll just become attached to it again and never want to leave,” Nermal says, looking at the floor.

“Hm... It’s amazing... How you miss your old home...” Kendo grumbles.

Nermal looks at Kendo and asks, “Ken... You... You don’t like your old home... Do you??”

“No...I don’t,” Kendo answers, “As a matter of fact... I fucking hate it... despise it...”

“O-Oh! Well I guess that would explain why you’re here.”

“I don’t want to go back, Nermal. That place is Hell...*literally*. I sometimes wish I did have good things to say about it, but there just isn’t. Not even the one person that I did get along with made it any better. Who wants to be watched 24/7? Who the fuck wants to be in a small room

with only the floor as a bed and the walls as acquaintances? Who *in the fuck* wants to be in a tight ass straitjacket 24/7, constricted from using any type of powers?! And ***what kind of fucking parent drugs their own child on a daily and try to brainwash them!?***

Kendo's voice begins booming across the room as he grips his bath towel tightly, making Nermal's heart tremble and body slowly back away from the angered soul. "K-Ken??" Nermal asks softly, noticing that Kendo is just pouring out everything on the spot... as if his final nerve has finally been snipped.

***"I don't get to talk about my first home like you get to, and it fucking sucks. I'll never know what it's like to miss a parent. I'll never know what it's like to crave for that visitation. I'll never know what it's like to love my birthplace so much that leaving it rips out a heartstring every time I talk about it."***

"You... You like being here..."

***"I LOVE it here!! I will do everything I can to stay here!! But... But... so many centuries... damn near close to a millennium... of being chased... caught... trapped... and losing the friendships and relationships I created... it's becoming tiresome, man. I tried to make it fun, tried to look at it as a positive like it was part of the experience, but boy when I get captured and go through the bullshit Pops puts me through... I hate that part of the ride... And when I find the people I bonded with before the capture when I escape... they either are pissed, disappointed, or dead... I don't blame them... I lie to them so that they don't know who I am... that I'm Aidoneus' runaway son."*** Along with the water that drips from his hair, tears begin falling onto the bath towel. "Nermal, I know I free-fall a lot, but I'm like you when it comes to the people I've created bonds with... I don't want to leave them. I've done this cycle so many times, I thought I would be used to it by now...you know, get with the program... and

*yet, here I am... befriending you... seeing how you and your friends share your bond... I envy that... because I don't get to know what it's like to have such a strong relationship... a friendship that lasts through the good and bad times... I always had to end mine... because I knew that I would have to be thrown into that hellhole again and again... never seeing those people again for a long time... I... I don't want to do that again with you guys... I want to stay... but I can't. I'm tired, Nermal.... I'm... I'm... sniffles... sobs... **FUCK MAN, WHY IS LIFE SO UNFAIR!?** wails..."*

"K-Kendo!!" Nermal sees Kendo fall to the ground, his cries fill the room as she kneels to his level and hugs him tightly. His intense sorrow washes over Nermal, and her eyes begin to water again. "P-Please don't cry, Ken," Nermal whimpers, hoping that Kendo can still hear her through his breakdown, "W-We'll find a way through this! You don't have to go through that vicious cycle anymore!!"

**"YES I DO!!"**

"NO YOU DON'T!! YOU DON'T DESERVE THIS TYPE OF TREATMENT! EVERY TIME YOU GO BACK TO UMU, IT SHOULD BE BECAUSE YOU WANT TO, NOT BECAUSE YOU'RE FORCED TO."

*"Sobs... sniffles... **Good luck telling him that...**"*

"Kendo, look at me right now!!"

Kendo shakes his head as he tries to look at the marble floor. *Sobs. sobs. Sniffles.*

"Ken, *please* look at me!"

Nermal takes her hand and gently tilts Kendo's head to where she can see his face covered by some of his hair. She uses her hands to push back his hair, seeing his tears making his eyes red and puffier than before, snot creeping out of his nose. Nermal says softly through his sniffles,

“I’m glad that I’m the first Gaian that you poured your heart to, Ken... You’ve built up this frustration and sadness for too long. And I promise you, as your new friend, I’m *going* to find a way to keep you safe from whoever tries to drag you back to Umu! As a matter of fact, you can stay here all you need to, okay? Just until we can come up with a solid plan of getting your dad off of you!”

“*sniffles.... You..... You promise...?*”

“Mhm! That’s what friends are for! Trust me, having these moments together is normal, Kendo! No matter what happens, I’ll always be here for you because I care!”

Kendo looks at Nermal through blurry eyes, and even though desolation still takes over him, a smile creeps up on his face. Nermal smiles widely through her own empathetic tears, and wanting to get rid of the sadness, she takes Kendo’s bath towel to gently wipe his face. She wipes his face a few times, letting Kendo enjoy the fuzzy texture as it soothes him. When Nermal removes the towel, however, she sees that Kendo’s face has changed; his eyes are taken over by very dark circles, and she looks at the towel to see foundation taking over the spot that touched his face. She softly gasps, and she looks at Kendo again as he still smiles through the revelation. A few more tears escape as he knows that the pain that he’s been trying to hide has finally been exposed. Kendo croaks out, “*Hehe... yeah... this is the result of him... Trust me, I looked much worse on other occasions...*”

“Oh my god....Kendo,” Nermal says softly, her smile being replaced with a frown of shock and worry.

Kendo hugs Nermal tightly and whispers, “*I’m glad you dragged me back inside, Nermal... sniffles...because I was close to considering ending it all if you didn’t...but I see now that it*

*wouldn't be fair to you... to Amethyst... to everyone else... so thank you... friend... sighs I'm so glad that I met you all..."*

## Chapter 30

### January 2017

Silence. Bleakness. Nothingness. Whatever desolate word you wanted to use to describe this empty, white, padded room would fit perfectly. It's not my idea of a good time, but apparently, it is to Aidoneus. I should call him by his old name, see how he likes it. He gets to adopt a whole new title and reputation, why can't I? I don't want to be Anti anymore. 'Anti, son of the devil, Prince of Evil', the fuck kind of title is that? No... I want to be Kendo. I *am* Kendo, Bringer of Chaos, Lover of Humans, Child of... Huh... who *is* my mom, anyway? I can't stand being known as Aidoneus' son, who's my other parent? I never really thought about it until now. I guess this 'classroom' is helpful sometimes. It gives me some time away from him. But then again... there's nothing for me to do... but to think... I hate thinking, sometimes. I just want to act.

I would be able to get out of here... if it weren't for this damn straitjacket. Ugh. Pops really doesn't want me to use *any* kind of magic, huh? I know I like to stray from magic shit from time to time, but where's the fun in having *no access at all*? Surprisingly there's *still* no cameras in here... is he really *that* confident in me not getting out of here *again*? I already escaped about 100 times ever since he forced me out of my old room and into this one. Maybe I could give him suggestions to spice things up a bit. I mean, if I'm going to be forced to do this shit for the rest of my life, I would like for Pops to give me a little more of a challenge.

*Creeeeeeaaaaaaak.*

And so... it begins... Well... farewell, free-thinking... goodbye, daydreams... so long, freedom... I will see you again... whenever Morgue-y wants to be a doll and get me out of here... for now... I have to play along...

*"Anti..."*



“Pops~! What’s uuup~?”

“*Why did you leave me again?*”

“Because this place is boring~ You ever thought of putting some furniture in here? Like some cameras, some spikes, or bring in some Upindeonis to beat me up from time to time?”

“*None of that is necessary, son. You see, in order for me to show you that I care for you, that I ‘LOVE’ you, I have to trust you. I trust that you will stay here, where home is. I trust that you will at least TRY to understand where I’m coming from. I have been so patient with you Anti, and I still am... for you are my son. Why can’t you reciprocate those actions towards me? I’ve been nothing but good to you. I’ve given you shelter, food, friends, freedom.*”

“Whoop-dee-fucking-doo, you do what every parent is *SUPPOSED* to do. The bare fucking minimum!”

“*You’d be surprised by the amount of human parents that won’t even do the bare minimum, Anti. You should be grateful.*”

“Whatever. You sound irritated... you good~?”

“*Of course I am okay... you returned to me~*”

“Cute choice of words, but I was *forced* to come back here, and you can thank your pet for making that possible.”

“*What matters is you’re here, now, Anti~*”

“I will get out of here, again, Aidoneus. Just give me a couple more months...”

“*Right... sighs Oh, my son... I’ve missed you so much...*”

“What are you doing!?”

*Strangle strangle strangle.*

“You never gave me hugs before, you’re not about to give me one, now!!”

*Strangle strangle strangle.*

*“Let’s make things right, son~”*

*“LET GO OF ME, YOU FUCKING PSYCHOPATH!!”*

*Stab.*

*“Ack...!”*

*“There we go~ Your first dosage~”*

*“.....”*

*“Hmhmhmhm~ Let me look at you~”*

*“.....”*

*“Aah, yes~ You feel it already, don’t you~? It’s different from last time~ Is your head swimming, son~? Can you feel that numbness taking over you~? That’s the feeling of serenity~ Peace~ Tranquility~ You don’t have to think anymore~ Just sit here... and listen to me~”*

*“...Hehehehehe...”*

*“You’re a baby, Anti. Protected. Loved. Nurtured. In the arms of your only Father. Feel my warm embrace~”*

*“Hehehehehehe....”*

*“You are my son. And as your Father, I know what’s best for you. These humans you ‘love’ so much... are nothing but tools...our weapons. This so-called ‘love’ you have for them...is nothing but a curse. ‘Love’ is a disease that clouds up your judgment. The sooner you accept the fact that you are my son and are meant to lead these humans and the rest of the Gaians to their demise... the sooner you will be free. Please, Anti...for me... stop loving these*

*humans...start using them like the idiots they are...I hope that by constantly reminding you of this, you'll come to your senses..."*

*"Hehehehehehehehehe..."*

*"Morgana will bring your next dosage, soon..."*

*Shove. Thud!!*

*"When I get done with whatever business I need to take care of, I'll come back. I want us to have these conversations more often~"*

*"Heh...heh...heh..."*

*Riiing! Riiing!*

*"Hello? Ah, Morgana... Yes yes, I'm on my way, now. In the meantime, could you come by and give Anti his second dosage? Be sure to tell the nurse peoni to increase it... Because it worked~ Anti didn't even take a second to slip into absence~... It's not going to kill him, dear, don't worry... Thank you, Morgana, I appreciate you~... Trust me, once I feel like Anti doesn't need this type of therapy, I will release him, which shouldn't take long hopefully..."*

...

**June 2017**

*"Ken? Kenny?"*

*"...Morgana..."*

*"Kenny!! Oh thank Ideya, you're alive. Listen, we don't have much time!"*

*"... What's the point anymore...?"*

*"H-Huh?"*

*"What's the point of escaping, anymore? I'm just going to stay here... Be the good boy that Father wants me to be... it's the only way to end my suffering..."*

*"What are you talking about!?"*

*“Father is right... everything that I have done has been pointless. I have done nothing but make matters worse. I should have never gone to Gaia. I should have never disobeyed Father. And I should have never dragged you into my shenanigans.”*

“You’re not making any sense!! Ugh! Stop talking, let me just get you out of that straitjacket.”

*“I’m so sorry, Morgana... I was a fool... to think that I could do whatever I pleased...”*

*SLAP!!!*

“KENDO, LISTEN TO ME!! YOU ARE NOT ANTI! YOU ARE KENDO! YOU’RE SUPPOSED TO BE IN Gaia CAUSING HAVOC, MEETING NEW PEOPLE, LIVING YOUR LIFE! IT’S BEEN TOO LONG SINCE YOU’VE BEEN YOUR FATHER’S PRISONER! NOW YOU’RE SPEWING OUT SHIT A BRAINWASHED FOLLOWER OF A TYRANT WOULD SAY!”

*“Hehehehe... Well that is what Father is trying to be, anyways... I just have to do what he says, and he’ll get what he wants...”*

“BUT IS THAT WHAT **YOU** WANT!?”

“.....”

“Oh my Ideya.....DIABLO!! DIABLO!! COME HERE!!”

*BARK BARK BARK!!*

“.....”

“Diablo, come on, boy!! Surely you can snap your best friend out of it!!”

*BARK BARK BARK!! Whimpers. Lick. Lick. Lick.*

“...Diablo?...”

*Whimpers. Whines.*

“...Diablo...Morgana...”

“Kenny?”

“*How...* could you two have fallen for that~!?”

“H-Huh!?”

“Hahahahahahahahaha~!! HAHAHAHAHAHAHAH~!! I GOTCHA~! I was just joking~!

You really think I’m ‘bout to kiss Pop’s ass now after all of this bullshit~?”

“Ugh! You asshole!! I was worried about you!!”

*BARK BARK!! BARK BARK BARK! Lick lick lick. Pant pant pant!*

“Awwww, I’m sorry, guys. I felt like changing up the pace of things and thought playing like Father’s little ‘therapy sessions’ were actually getting to me~...But... it’s good to see that you two care... kinda makes me feel bad for escaping...”

“Alright alright, save it, mister. There’s a realm waiting for your return, and you *cannot* be late. The guards are probably catching on to what’s happening, so we better make haste.”

*Jingle jingle jingle. Click! Clank! Fwoosh! Fwoosh! Fwoosh! Plop!*

“Whoa! You managed to get the chains AND buckles in under 20 seconds this time~! Good job, Morgue-y~!”

“Hhmhm~ Come on, Kenny~ Let’s get you back to your new home~”

Home... *New* home... Yeah... I like the sound of that. Away from here. Away from him. Hopefully, Diablo will come and visit me from time to time like he’s been doing. Morgana... I hope that she stays safe, too, and hopefully she can get out of here... out of Aidoneus’ grasp. Huh... I talk as if I’ll be free forever... I truly want to *stay* in Gaia *permanently*. However, I know that it’ll never happen... Cerberus will be coming for me the moment Aidoneus catches wind of what’s happened... *It’s not fair...*

...  
**Present**

**Night**  
**July 2017**

Kendo enjoys the embrace Nermal and he are in together, letting the negative emotions he felt prior evaporate into thin air along with the water that has been on him from the thunderstorm. Sounds of the rain hitting against the mansion's roof fills the quiet kitchen, soothing the two hybrids, when suddenly *BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG!!* Loud knocking from the front door along with loud thunder startles Nermal and makes her squeal. Kendo, curious as to who it could be, gets up from the floor and says, "I'll go check on who it is. If it's Pierre, I'll try to distract him for as long as I can for you to give Amy a warning."

"O-Okay!" Nermal agrees, standing up along with him, and they walk to the living room together. Kendo walks to the door while Nermal gets to the stairs, preparing herself to run the moment she hears Pierre.

Kendo clears his throat and says in a light-hearted tone, "Pierre~!! Is that you wanting to see me~?"

"Kendo!? What are you doing in there!?"

"Huh?" Kendo asks, flustered. The voice on the other side of the door doesn't belong to Pierre; Nermal softly gasps and runs towards the door.

"Wait a minute," Nermal exclaims, "Rose, is that you!?"

"Yes it's me!" Rose says gleefully, "And I'm with Tee and Issei! Is it okay if we can come in?"

"*Gasps!* My vampire boo thang is with you~?" Kendo asks, "Well, why didn't you say so~!" Without wasting any more time, Kendo swings the door open, letting in Rose, Tenacity, and Issei.

Before Kendo could close the door, “WAAAIT FOOR MEEEE!!” Everyone looks to see that it’s Melissa pulling up, turning off her car, and running out with her umbrella trying to stay strong through the tough winds as she walks up the stairs.

“Awwww look at her~ She’s so cute~!” Kendo coos, letting in Melissa. She pants and sighs, closing up her pink umbrella. As soon as she leans her umbrella against the wall, Nermal pulls Tenacity, Rose, and her into a tight group hug, not caring about their wet bodies.

“I’m so happy to see you guys~!” Nermal squeals.

“Awwww, I’m glad that we reunited, too!” Rose agrees.

“No kidding, I’ve never thought I’d see MeeMee again,” Tenacity teases.

“Ugh, excuse me? Ma’am, I hate to disappoint, but dad can’t keep me trapped forever~”

Melissa teases back.

“*Sighs* A lady that thinks just like me,” Kendo coos out.

“Oh,” Nermal says, “Ken, you wanna join the hug?”

“Huh? Really?” Kendo asks.

“Yeah! You’re part of the friend group now!” Nermal cheers.

“He is?” Tenacity, Rose, and Melissa ask simultaneously.

“Can we hold off on the group hugs,” Issei requests in a serious tone, “Kendo, we need to talk.”

“Hm? About what, chocolate drop~?” Kendo asks, getting closer to him, “Oh~! Is it about the other day~? You ready to give me that bite now~?”

“Did you know that your father was trying to kill you?” Issei asks, not wasting anymore time.

“H-Huh?” Nermal questions the peoni hunter, and the group hug disconnects.

“It’s true,” Rose confirms, “Issei has been researching the devil ever since our first encounter with Cerberus and Pierre, and he’s found a lot of information.”

“Huh... could have fooled me, I thought he was trying to marry my ass,” Kendo jokes while rolling his eyes.

“And it’s so that he can use your soul for his Judgement Day plan,” Rose explains.

“Wow... so because I refused to help him out in taking over everything, he’s decided to try to have his way with me and take my soul” Kendo says, tapping his chin.

“Um...C-Could you word that a little differently, please,” Nermal asks innocently.

“Again, my thing is Issei’s trying to make it seem like we can do anything about this huge plan that the devil’s plotted,” Tenacity adds, still unsure where Issei’s plan is going.

“Well, he *is* a peoni hunter,” Melissa concludes, “It’s probably in his nature to look into this kind of stuff and put a stop to them.”

“Okay, but this is *the devil* we’re talking about,” Tenacity says.

“Ouu!! Ou!! Are we gonna kick the devil’s ass~!!” Everyone looks up to see Jacqueline and Amethyst walking down the stairs. Jacqueline squeals out, “Yaaasss~!! The Special Six, saving Amy and Kendo for the second and last time~! Going to literal Hell and fighting off the Devil himself~!!”

As they make it to the end of the stairs to reunite with their team, Issei walks around and says, “That’s probably what we’ll have to do. Sadly, I don’t have a way to take all of you into the Spirit Realm, but maybe if Alex or Thomas come around soon, they can help us out.”

“Aah, wanting to break the Spiritual Laws, huh~?” Kendo purrs.

“Your father’s busy breaking them, so I think it’s fair,” Issei responds.

“Mmmm, I *really* like you~” Kendo snickers out.



But before they can continue the discussion, a 90's RnB song plays on Tenacity's phone. Tenacity grabs her phone out of her purse, and she sees that it's Rose's contact calling her.

"Huh?" she voices out, "Rose, I think your mom's calling again."

"What?" Rose asks, but then she shakes her head and says, "Again?? *sighs* Here, let me speak to her this time."

"Yeah, here you go," Tenacity agrees and gives the phone to the Quphanto/Tansi hybrid.

"Ouu, put it on speaker," Kendo suggests.

"That'll probably be a good idea, dear," Amethyst agrees.

"Okay," Rose says and wastes no more time as she answers the phone, puts it on speaker, and says, "Hello? Momma?"

*"Rose? Oh darling, is that you!?"*

"Yes, mom, it's me! A-Are you okay?"

*"Oh I'm wonderful now that I heard your voice! **Sighs** That just made things 10x better. Also, sorry for using your phone, darling. I didn't have any of your friends' contacts on my phone, and I saw that you left your phone here. I checked to see if I could 'hack' into your phone to talk to you or Tenacity, and honey, your password is still the same from highschool. You should really change it."*

"Moouoom!"

*"Anyway, I hate to sound like **that** parent, but where are you?? Tenacity said that you two would be at Jacqueline's place. Is that true?"*

"Yes, momma, don't worry, we're all just fine! We're not out in the rain or anything."

*"Oh okay, good! Listen, um... I don't want this to come off as a surprise when it happens but-"*

*“Nruku!! Haraka!!”*

“What the... Momma, was that, daddy-”

*“YOUR DAD GOT HIS SISTERS TELEPORTING US TO YOUR LOCATION NOW, SO  
DON'T BE SURPRISED WHEN-” **Call drop.***

“Mom!? MOM!?”

Rose looks up from the phone and sees everyone sharing the same shocked expression, eyes wide open, jaws close to touching the floor. Kendo looks at you, the reader, and mutters out,  
*“Well I’m getting deja vu...”*

## Chapter 31

July 2017

Night

The Special Six, Kendo, and Issei look at Tenacity's phone that rests in Rose's hands as they process what Delilah just told them. The first to break the few seconds of silence is Jacqueline, and she asks, "Wait, your dad has sisters??"

"Um," Rose hesitates, "Yeeah, about that-" *FWOOOOOOSH!!* Before Rose could explain to Jacqueline, a whirlwind of sparkly, red magic appears a couple feet away from them. Seconds later, *squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak squeak!* Rose's bat-aunts swirl around in the magic they are using to teleport Usiku and Delilah, and as soon as the magic disappears, the couple stands there, holding hands and closing their eyes. The seven bats sit in different spots in the living room, watching their brother open his eyes to look straight at his daughter in worry. "D-Daddy," Rose starts as she walks towards him, "What are you guys doing here? I said we were fine-"

"We're going home," Usiku interrupts her, gripping his daughter's arm but not too tightly.

However, Rose snatches herself away from him and says, "No! Daddy, I'm not letting you do this again!"

"Wow, I thought you would have learned by now, Usiku," Melissa snaps at Rose's father, standing next to Rose with her hands on her hips.

"For reals, though," Jacqueline joins in, standing next to Melissa, "You, like, already tried excluding her from the fun, last time, what makes you think it's going to work *this* time?"

"I wouldn't say it's 'fun', but she has a point," Tenacity says, standing next to Rose with one hand on her hip, "Usiku, you didn't see the fight with Cerberus and Pierre 'cuz if it weren't for Rose, we'd be dead right now..."

“They’re right, Usiku,” Amethyst stands behind them all, “The potions could only do so much for Tenacity, Melissa, and Jacqueline. Despite the fact that you already defeated Cerberus, I don’t think they’d be able to fight them with just a potion in their system. With Rose’s power, they were able to take on one of the Cerberus Brothers and Pierre *and* use their powers in ways I didn’t think they’d be able to achieve until after a few weeks or months of training.”

Delilah pays attention to how the ladies explain themselves, examines the room and notices that Issei and Kendo are also here, and as she stands next to Usiku, she says, “Well now wait a minute, because *I* thought you girls were just hanging out like always. I was going to question why Amethyst is with you all because Alex told me how Pierre was after her, but then I see... whoever these two guys are, too...” After Delilah’s explanation and observation, Usiku’s eyes widen as he notices how the girls don’t even know why he’s coming to get Rose, yet they immediately refer to the battle they had, as if they’re planning to go fight the evil team once more. With confusion and concern plastered on her face, Delilah continues, “Guys, what’s really going on?”

Nermal joins her team, looks at Delilah and Usiku with a trembling heart, and she says, “Ms. Garcia, Mr. Usiku, I know that this is A LOT, we honestly don’t know what we’re doing, either. But all of this is happening because Kendo’s dad is trying to drag him back to Umu, but he doesn’t want to go! And it’s true, Pierre is trying to get Amy, although we don’t know why. So, as The Special Six, plus Issei, we’re all trying to come up with a plan to stop all of this so that they can live their lives however they want!”

“Cute,” Usiku says, dismissing Nermal’s statement, “Have *‘fun’* playing hero to a guy that can’t help himself...”

“Wow, ouch,” Kendo says, chuckling.

“But Rose is not becoming a part of this,” Usiku demands, “She’s done enough. You girls are going to have to do these shenanigans on your own.”

“Awwww, but Usiku, aren’t *you* a descendant of a *Quphanto~?*” Kendo asks, smirking, “Surely, with *your* help *and* your daughter’s, we’d be an unstoppable group~!”

“If we’re being honest, you kinda *have* to help us, Usiku,” Issei says, including himself in the conversation, “If you were able to ‘kill’ Cerberus, you can ‘kill’ the devil. I know that spiritual beings can’t ‘die’, but you stopping the devil and ending his bullshittery will force him to start over, meaning all of the progress he’s made with his plans and whatever he has done to get himself to the status he’s in right now will be *gone*.”

“...So in other words, the devil wouldn’t be *the devil*, anymore,” Tenacity says, trying to understand what Issei is proposing.

“Then let’s do it!” Jacqueline exclaims, “We don’t need Usiku’s help! The Special Six can do anything and everything~!”

“Agreed!” Melissa concurs, “So we’ll wait until we see Thomas or Alex again, and they’re gonna help us get to the root of the problem.”

“Please understand, Ms. Garcia and Mr. Usiku,” Nermal pleads with puppy eyes, “You don’t have to get involved, but we *really* want to do this! Rose *wants* to help us! And then when this is all over, you won’t have to worry about us doing something this crazy and out of this world again!”

“This isn’t even just about keeping Kendo and Amethyst safe, anymore” Issei enforces, “We’re also saving *the world* by taking on this task.”

“You *have* to let me go do this, guys,” Rose pleads her parents, “For the longest, I wondered why I was given these powers, and I now believe I found the answer. Perhaps, as Ubokufa’s descendant, I’m *supposed* to be getting involved in these spiritual affairs.”

Usiku’s face heats up as his heartbeat races, powered by the horrendous vision that’s been haunting him from the beginning, and his voice booms as he says, “This is *not* what you’re meant to do, Rose!”

Rose storms closer to Usiku and stands on her tiptoes to get closer to his face and yells, “And who are you to tell me that!? Do you ever think that maybe *you* were supposed to stop the devil!? We’re Ubokufa’s people, descendants of Life and Death!”

Usiku bends down a little to get a closer look at his daughter, both of their noses scrunching up the same way. He argues, “Listen to yourself, Rose Nruku Garcia! If Ubokufa wanted to deal with him, he’d have done it by now!”

“But what if there’s something stopping him from doing so!?” Rose rebuttals.

“Like what!?” Usiku snaps.

“I-I don’t know, but clearly it’s something,” Rose hesitates.

“You’ve done enough by helping your friends with Cerberus and that other peoni! You don’t need to do anything else!”

“Dad, I’m 18 now!! I can do whatever I choose, and I’ve chosen to help my friends, including Kendo!!”

“What!?” Another exhausted voice chimes in, and everyone looks around to see where it came from; in a bright light, Alexander in his full Upendelaiki form appears behind Usiku and Delilah, making Delilah jump and hug Usiku tightly.

“Oh!” Delilah exclaims, “Alex, when did you get in here? *How* did you get here?!”

“*Pants.... pants....* Well, when you realize that your lover disappeared, you’re willing to look *everywhere*, but of course, I had to do it all of that in Spirit Realm,” Alexander groans out as he tries to catch his breath, his platinum halo and large Malaiki wings disappearing, his light blue eyes transferring back to ocean blue.

“Huh... thought you couldn’t go into Spirit Realm by yourself, vanilla bean,” Kendo teases him.

“I’m not talking to you,” Alexander answers, “Now back to the important stuff.” He walks towards the group and stands next to Usiku and says, “Rose, what do you mean you’re helping Kendo!? He’s caused nothing but trouble for all of us!”

Usiku notices that Alexander is mostly taking his side on the situation based on the disapproving tone that Alexander has right now. Usiku steps away from Rose as he shifts his eyes to his father-figure and says, “Thank you, that’s what I’m trying to get through to her head. Maybe she’ll listen to you since you’re an Upendelaiki.”

Amethyst, knowing that Alexander only doesn’t like this whole situation because he personally doesn’t like Kendo, walks up to her lover and she says, “Alex, I may not know exactly why you truly don’t like Kendo, but we already know that he cannot go back to Umu because of some Spiritual Law Thomas mentioned to us.”

“I know that, Amy,” Alexander strains out, “But we clearly see that whenever Kendo is around, some shit is in the air, and we do not need to be around it!!”

“Wooooow, I love you, too, vanilla bean,” Kendo mutters.

“Kendo can do whatever he wants to do, but he needs to get the hell away from you, from *us*, from the girls,” Alexander demands.

“Alex,” Amethyst says softly, her slit pupils dilating. She rests her hands on Alexander’s chest, trying to bring out the compassionate Upendelaiki she knows and loves, “Don’t you understand that as long as Kendo is on the run, I will be too? If we choose to not lend a helping hand, then who will?”

“Someone that’s not us,” Alexander answers harshly, “Besides, it doesn’t make sense that Kendo’s situation has you connected all of a sudden! Literally everything was just fine until Kendo came into the picture, babe!”

“Well, *genius*,” Kendo barks back, getting closer to the Upendelaiki, “If you would have given me time to explain everything, because I’m just now finding out about this shit, too, Amethyst has been an interest to my Pops for a long ass time now. Day in, day out, even when I was in Aidoneus’ clutches, Amethyst was still being searched for, according to Pierre.”

“What!?” Alexander shouts, “But...But...What does he want with Amethyst!?”

“Oh nooo, this isn’t any of your concern, remember,” Kendo taunts Alexander, “YoU dOn’T WaNt aNyThInG To dO wIth tHiS SitUaTiON.”

Alexander’s nostrils flare up and his ocean waves within his eyes become cruel. “Start talking, you peoni spawn,” he declares.

“Ooouuuuu, haven’t heard that one before,” Kendo says sarcastically with a smug face.

“Guys, please!” Delilah begs, getting between the bickering, “We don’t have time for this. It seems like this situation is much deeper than we initially thought. If you ask me, *I* think you all should leave it to Thomas...”

“What!?” The Special Six shout simultaneously, shock, rage, and disappointment splashing all over their faces. Usiku looks at his lover in relief, grateful that his soulmate is also taking his side.



“Mom,” Rose whimpers, her voice cracks from the despair her heart is trying to endure.

Delilah sighs and she says calmly, “I know, baby, but... your dad and Alex have a point. I hate knowing that Kendo and Amethyst are wanted by the Devil himself, but that’s the thing. It’s *the Devil*, and that man is known for having powers a regular Upindeoni shouldn’t have. His powers are almost godlike for who knows why and has had them for who knows how long! Going against him *in his own turf* is a death sentence, sweetie...” Usiku wraps his arm around his lover, keeping her close to him to let her know that he’s right there with her. Even though Delilah’s heart weighs heavy on her, feeling Usiku’s slight embrace brings her comfort and leaves her hope lit. Alexander looks at Amethyst, now unsure what side to choose after being told that his lover has always been in danger, and Amethyst stares into his eyes, silently pleading him to change his mind and to lend a helping hand.

Rose looks at her parents in dismay, not understanding why her father, and now her mother, are so reluctant in letting her do what she wants. Tenacity glares at the couple with a sneer, Jacqueline stares at them with disapproval, Melissa scans them in disgust, and Nermal gazes at them in desperation. Kendo and Issei watch the whole fiasco go down like a TV show, not sure if their input is going to affect anything at this point. Silence filled the room for a few seconds, then suddenly...

“Ya’ll can’t be fuckin’ serious,” Tenacity says.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Jacqueline says.

“There’s no way you’re saying this bullshit to us, right now,” Melissa sneers.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this but... but,” Nermal struggles, but she pushes, “but you’re being big dummy heads!!”

“Man, you know what, fuck this, they’re right,” Issei says as he steps up to stand beside the girls, “You two are being fucking idiots.”

“Yeah,” Kendo joins the team, “I mean it just *astounds* me that you two are doing all you can to convince these ladies that they don’t have a chance against the devil when not only do they have their own powers but they also have a friend-”

“WHO IS HALF QUPHANTO!!!” The angry mob simultaneously shout at the top of their lungs, letting Rose know that they see her potential and are tired of hearing her parents talk as if they don’t believe in her.

Usiku and Delilah witness the uproar together, backing away slightly like the group transformed into a dangerous flame. Delilah looks at Usiku wearily, feeling as if they’re the antagonists. Usiku, however, closes his eyes and takes a few deep breaths, and with no hesitation, he growls out, “***NONE of you will EVER understand why we’re doing this... why I’M doing this. By letting Rose help you all in your little quest, you will only be HURTING her. Don’t you get it, you fools? I’m trying to PROTECT her!***”

“Is it to *protect* her or *shelter* her?” Kendo questions the towering man.

“Hold on, guys,” Rose finally speaks, bothered by her father’s statement. She approaches Usiku, and as her eyes search for the meaning behind his words, as if there’s more to what he’s truly saying, she stammers, “Daddy... what do you mean that this mission is going to.... *hurt* me?”

Before Usiku can explain himself, *fwoosh!!* Total darkness takes over the room, making everyone either scream or voice their questions and concerns. Everything- the lights and the appliances- simultaneously lose their power and leaves the people in the mansion in confusion and fear.

## Chapter 32

July 2017

Night

Pierre flies through the unsettling dark sky in the Spirit Realm, not letting the heavy rain faze him. “I saw him go this direction,” he says to himself, “And if he went this way, then that means that cat and mangy brat is there.” He continues flying through the monstrous storm, sounds of the rain hitting the trees and ground along with the thunder fills his ears like an unorganized orchestra, disturbing his train of thoughts. However, his spiritual energy successfully finds Alexander’s, and Pierre flies downward towards a great, white mansion. He stands at the entrance, recognizing the black and pink vehicles from before; at that moment, he knew The Special Six was here, as well. Pierre lets out a long sigh and groans out, “Well great... Why do I have to deal with *them* again?”

Then, *BOOOOOOOOOOOOM!! Rumble rumble rumble!!* Thunder shakes the earth, disturbing Pierre’s thoughts. Before Pierre can even gather himself up and think of a plan, he feels a cold yet smooth hand grip his shoulder, sending intense chills across his body and making his soul jump out of his vessel. He jerks his head to see who is behind him, and it is his cunning leader, Aidoneus, his abundant jewelry not in their full glamor because of the darkness. Aidoneus looks at his shocked follower with an unsettling smile. “Aah, Pierre,” Aidoneus says sedately, “So good to see you again. Here to capture your target?”

“Y-Yes sir,” Pierre says hesitantly, still trying to gather himself, “And I-I believe Anti is in there, as well.”

“I know, hmhmhmhm,” Aidoneus giggles sinisterly. He scans Pierre and sees how shaken he is, and he gently rubs his back and chuckles out, “Ease up, kid, hahaha~! I’m not here to punish you. I’m here to help~! Just listen to my plan, and everything will go accordingly~” Pierre takes deep breaths, trying to keep himself calm, and he nods in understanding. Aidoneus explains

calmly, “I will go into that mansion, and I’ll interfere with the electricity, leaving them confused and baffled. Don’t worry, they won’t even be able to sense my presence... not even Usiku or his *cursed* sisters. In a few minutes, the storm will let out another roar. When she calms down, that’s when you’ll play the tune *outside* of Spirit Realm, and I will help lead the cat out of the mansion along with my target. Understand?”

Pierre nods, but as Aidoneus approaches the mansion, Pierre raises one eyebrow in curiosity. He can’t help but ask, “My Lord, I’m just wondering... how do you know if the thunder will come around when you are expecting it to? And you just said you’ll get your ‘target’... your target *is* Anti... right?”

Aidoneus turns slightly, looking over his shoulder smirking, and he answers in a chilling tone, “***Trust in me like you always have, Pierre~ My Spirit Eye never fails me...***” And in a quick second, the powerful Upindeoni’s body turns into a large body of pure dark energy and flies into the mansion, and Pierre exits the Spirit Realm, letting the rain shower him as he places the recorder gently upon his lips, waiting for his signal. His inner thoughts tell him that something huge and catastrophic is about to happen as he revisits how his leader worded his plan.

*The cat and his target, Pierre thinks to himself, Why didn’t he just say ‘the cat and his son’...? I know he’s here for Kendo... isn’t he...?*

...

The Special Six, peoni hunter, runaway hybrid, and pair of soulmates try to stay calm within the darkness of the mansion. Tenacity, Rose, Jacqueline, Melissa, and Nermal hug each other tightly, their bodies shake together in fear and anxiety caused by the storm and blackout; Alexander embraces Amethyst as she buries herself into his body, trying to find some sort of

comfort. Delilah cuddles Usiku and she whimpers out, “Oooh, honey, do something!! It’s too dark!!”

Usiku grumbles, “Darling, this isn’t our house. You tell me to do something as if I know where the electric box is at.”

“Well, if someone can give me some light and directions to the electric box, I’ll take care of it,” Issei says, wanting to resolve this slight issue.

“Oh! Right! I can summon my fireflies,” Rose exclaims happily.

“Yaay! *P-Please* bring them here,” Nermal says as her voice shakes.

But as soon as Rose clasps her hands together, right before she is about to summon her white fireflies, *BOOOOOOOOOOM!!! Rumble rumble rumble!!!* As the storm roars, the girls squeal together as the house along with the objects throughout the room shake and tremble. Delilah whimpers into Usiku’s chest, and she digs her sharp nails into his back, making him softly grunt. Suddenly, Kendo’s body experiences an intense wave of fright and he whispers, “*Wait a minute...*”

Before Kendo can try to figure it out, the storm calms itself down once more and the thunder stops thundering. Not a second later, the sound of a recorder playing in a minor key can be heard through the pouring rain, and a bright light emits from Alexander’s arms. The light disappears, and Alexander lets out a gasp and his voice goes up a few octaves as he exclaims, “W-What the!? A-Amy!? Amy, where are you!? Amy!!”

“Wait, that was Amy!?” Delilah asks, and she exclaims, “Amy, say something! Where are you!?”

“Rose, I think now would be a good time to get those fireflies here,” Tenacity yells out, and to provide temporary light until Rose’s fireflies come around, she tries to summon her flames...

however, her powers don’t work. “Wait... what the!?”

“Tee? Tee, what’s up?” Jacqueline whines.

“My powers!! My powers aren’t working!!” Tenacity screams.

“HUH!?” Jacqueline and Melissa shout simultaneously. Jacqueline tries to summon her frost, and Melissa attempts to cause some wind, but nothing happens. They scream together. The uprise of stress causes Rose to forget about the fireflies, and she tries to look around in the darkness trying to search for her friends.

“Guys, calm down, please,” Rose pleads, “Just let me focus and-”

*SQUEAK SQUEAK SQUEAK SQUEAK SQUEAK SQUEAK SQUEAK!!* Usiku’s bat-sisters cry out, and Usiku searches in the darkness. “Hm? Bats?” Usiku asks, but then silence. Not a squeak is heard again in the peculiar darkness. Usiku yells out, “Girls!? Dara?! Safiya!? Zawati!!”

Delilah whimpers out softly, “*Usi, what’s happening!?*”

Alexander cries once more, “Amy!! What the hell is going on!?!”

Issei pieces together the unnatural occurrences and he breaks through the chaos and says, “This could only be the work of a powerful Quphanto to cause all of this!”

Kendo’s eyes widen and he shouts, “Or Aido-!!” *Stab.*

“Huh?? Kendo?!” Issei nervously yells out, not used to sudden silence from the chaotic jokester.

“GUYS, CALM DOWN!!!” Rose’s shrilling command echoes throughout the dark mansion, only rain and the music from a recorder can be heard. Rose takes a few deep breaths, trying to

regain her composure, runs through her ideas to find the best solution, and within a few seconds, she says calmly with a stern voice, “If you guys will just give me a second, I can try to summon my fireflies.” After saying that, she tries to summon her fireflies... however, they do not appear. “W-What?” Rose’s heart skips a beat when her powers don’t come to the rescue like her friends’ powers.

Suddenly, *BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!!! Rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble!!* The storm roars once more, and the despair-filled music stops. And then the mansion’s electricity comes back to life, the lights flickering back on. Everyone looks around to see if they can discover any answers as to what is going on. Usiku and Delilah notice the bats laid out on the floor in front of them. Usiku’s eyes widen while Delilah lets out a sharp gasp and kneels down to pick one of them up. “Girls!?” Delilah says anxiously, “Girls, please wake up!”

Alexander looks everywhere for Amethyst, but there’s no sight of her. “Amy!? Amy!?!” Alexander cries out as he sprints towards the front doors, opening them to see if he can find her outside.

Tenacity, Rose, Jacqueline, and Melissa look around aimlessly, not sure what’s happening or what to do. Suddenly, “*Hehehehehehehehehehe...*” Low chuckles can be heard from below, catching the group off guard. “*Hehehehehehehehehehehehehehe...*”

Rose looks down and notices Kendo on the ground, his body shaking from his broken laughter. “Kendo?” Rose asks, kneeling down and turning his body to look at his face, but she just sees Kendo’s eyes rolled back, the dark bags underneath his eyes darkened , and slimy drool escaping his mouth as he giggles. “Oh my god, Ken!! What happened to you!?” Rose cries out as she positions herself to where she can rest Kendo’s head on her lap as she examines him.

Issei looks around, tilts his head in perplexion, and says, “Uuuuuuh... girls?... I know that Amy is somewhere, but... shouldn’t there still be *five* of you left in here??”

*BA-BUMP!!* The four girls look around, and Melissa says softly with her voice cracking, “Um...Does anyone see Nermal?”

“...I... thought she was here??” Tenacity hesitantly says, trying to keep her cool and collected composure, only to fail and her hands visibly shake rapidly.

“Sh-She has to be here,” Jacqueline exclaims, “She’s probably, like, somewhere else in the house!! Nermal!? NeeNee!! You can come out now!!”

“I...don’t think she’d be able to walk around here in the dark, Jackie,” Issei says nonchalantly yet somewhat nervously.

“Your peoni hunter pal is right,” Usiku confirms to the girls as he and Delilah cradle his bat-sisters, “Including Alex, we are the only ones here... Amethyst... and Nermal... are...”

*BOOM!!* “SHE’S GONE!!!!” A shrilling scream startles the team, and they see Alexander burst through the front doors after searching outside in the middle of the thunderstorm, drenched. In a mixture of pants and whimpers, Alexander falls to the ground and wails out, “MY PRECIOUS AMY IS GONE!!!”



To be continued...